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I want to Escape from Princess Lessons

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I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons: Volume 1 [Complete]

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My betrothed was accompanying a beautiful lady.

I'd just been asking myself where my escort could be when I saw them. Lord Clarke, my fiancé and crown prince of this nation, stood before me, arm in arm with another woman.

"Leticia, this is Lady Brianna," he said.

The noble lady flagrantly leaned even closer to the prince as they approached me. It was so blatant that for a moment, I was at a loss.

"I cannot keep you company today," Lord Clarke declared, interrupting my train of thought.

His words rang clear in the silent hall, where other guests had been watching us intently.

"Will you be accompanying her, then?" I asked.

"My apologies," he replied.

"Does that mean our betrothal is..." I trailed off.

"It does," the prince confirmed.

It does.

Those words echoed over and over in my mind. My hands, trembling, balled into fists.

It does. It does. It does. It does. It really does!

"Finally!" I exclaimed.

"Pardon?"

Surely I didn’t look very much like the daughter of a duke right now, with my hands in the air, jumping up and down. But I didn’t care. There was no longer a need for me to act ladylike.

I ran to my older brother, who stood behind Lord Clarke with a dejected look on his face.

“Did you hear that, brother?” I exclaimed. “Did you hear? You heard it loud and clear, yes?!”

“I did,” he said flatly.

“At last! At long last!” I joined my hands in prayer over my chest and gazing up at the heavens.

Oh, thank you, god! I thought. Prayer sessions at the church had been nothing but a hassle, but I promised my prayers would be sincere from now on!

“What a horrid ten years it has been! Ever since my betrothal to the crown prince at the age of seven, day after day, it’s just been study study study study, dance dance dance dance! And, oh, the incessant tea parties! Awful! Every! Last! One!”

“L-Leticia?”

“I’m criticized for any and every thing I do! If I so much as laugh out loud, why, I’m too vulgar! But did my doing so inconvenience anyone? No, of course not! If I happen to be in a bit of a hurry and break into a jog, I’m improper! Fault-finding, so much fault-finding!”

“Lettie?”

“I was resigned to it,” I continued. “What else could I do? But now I don’t need to be! This is amazing! And it’s all thanks to you, ah... What was it? Buh...Be...Bre...Brie?”

“It’s *Brianna*!” the young woman snapped, beet red with fury, her ample bosom—which I was not at all jealous of, oh no—heaving conspicuously.

I could tell I had offended her, however, so I faked a remorseful look and offered her an apology.

“Please pardon my indiscretion,” I said. “That was rather *cheesy* of me.”

“Do you mean to mock me?!”

“Perhaps a little, but I truly *am* grateful!” I exclaimed. “Thank you so much for taking on this bad debt!”

“Bad...debt,” she echoed.

“I can hardly believe you’re willing to suffer through being cooped up in a castle ten hours a day every day, studying, dancing, enduring the nobles’ harassment at tea parties, all in my stead! Best of luck to you! I’ll be rooting for you!”

“Um...”

Brie went pale, but I was sure she would be just fine! As the minstrel who’d recently visited the town had said, “Love conquers all!” I didn’t have a single shred of love, however, so no conquering for me.

“Ah, brother, but you *must* be heartbroken! It was *you* who *forced* me into this engagement, after all! Please, *do* find some other means to establish ties with the royal family!”

“Of course,” my brother replied.

“Lord Clarke found himself a wonderful woman, so you’ll keep your promise to allow me freedom, yes?!”

“Of course,” he repeated, looking resigned.

“Ha ha! I’m free as a bird!” I exclaimed. “Goodbye, ladyhood! I’m moving to the countryside! I’ll go fishing, and then fish some more, climb trees, prance about with the village children, work the fields, and laugh with my mouth wide open!”

“Lettie—”

“Oh, my lord Clarke!” I interrupted. “Thank you *so* much for everything! I will move to a remote area and *never again* encounter anyone of *such* fine pedigree as yourself, but fret not for me! Please, flirt with *whomever*, produce *however* many heirs you wish to, and make the nation *prosper*! Truly, worry not! I’m happy as can be! I mean, *yes*, if you were going to do this I *do* wish you’d tossed me aside sooner, and I *would* prefer to have all the days I wasted back, but all of that will stay confined within my thoughts! Please, cast all worries aside!”

I waved emphatically at the smiling Lord Clarke. Now that I was no longer a lady, I didn’t need to worry about keeping my hand-waving dainty and restrained! Oh, what joy!

Granted, it *was* a little suspicious that he was smiling despite my rant, but such minor things no longer concerned me.

Leaving the stunned crowd behind, I headed for the exit, anxious to prepare. It was time for me to be truly happy. Great job, me!

Patting myself on the back, I envisioned my future as I climbed into the carriage.

***

“Happiness simply happens, doesn’t it, Lily?”

“My lady, did you hit your head?”

Sitting next to me in the carriage, my handmaiden eyed me with bewilderment. Her remark *was* rude, but I didn’t mind. It’d been a long time since I was last in such a great mood!

“Finally my promise to my brother has been fulfilled!” I told Lily, beaming.

She looked at me with uncharacteristic astonishment. “Truly?”

“Truly!”

“And this promise involved your freedom in some way?”

“Yes! I’m free!”

“My lady, *did* you hit your head?”

“Why are you asking me that again?!” I snapped. Once I could overlook, but twice?

I had *not* hit my head. If anything, my only discomfort was that I was hungry, since I’d left the party in a hurry.

“Well, it’s difficult to believe,” Lily said.

“Isn’t it?” I replied with a chuckle.

I never thought this day would come. *This is like a dream,* I thought. *Maybe it* is *a dream.* But I pinched my cheeks, and it hurt, so it had to be reality.

It’s not a dream! I’m no longer engaged to First Prince Clarke, heir to the Kingdom of Astarl!

I couldn’t contain the laughter building up within me. I didn’t want to. Lily looked at me with disgust, which, once again, *was* rude, but it didn’t matter.

Finally, I was being rewarded for my ten years of perseverance.

A decade earlier, when I’d turned seven, I was suddenly summoned to the royal palace, and informed of my betrothal to the prince.

And the ten years that had followed were hell. Well, I had no intention of going to the real thing, so I couldn’t exactly compare, but I was pretty certain that *had* to be what hell was like.

“We’ve arrived,” the coachman said, bringing me back to reality from my sea of thoughts.

I stepped out of the carriage. After leaving the party that evening, I’d headed straight for the residence of my family—House Dolman—in the royal capital. The residence where, unfortunately, I’d been made to live in since age seven.

As the fiancée of the crown prince, I’d had no choice but to move to the capital. I was no longer permitted to receive tutoring within our family’s territory, and was to have dedicated instructors in the royal palace.

Before that, I was free.

As his first-born daughter, I was given a lot of freedom by my father, a duke and the head of our family, who had doted on me a great deal. Since he didn’t plan on arranging a betrothal for me anytime soon, I didn’t particularly need to meet with other nobles, and was told that my studies as a noble lady wouldn’t need to begin in earnest until I reached the age of ten, the typical age at which education started for most aristocratic children.

As a result, my engagement at age seven came as quite the shock.

My father cried, my mother smiled, and my brother was elated. I don’t quite remember how I reacted.

Either way, from that point on, my daily life changed drastically. Like I said, at the time I was doted on and hadn’t received a proper lady’s education yet.

Suddenly, I was being given a *princess’* education instead. My instructors were strict. A daily schedule I didn’t consent to was drilled into my mind. I had to live in a large manor, away from my parents.

I cried. I cried a great deal.

If I behaved in a way my instructors disapproved of, they would quickly raise their voices in anger. My sobs echoed throughout the halls. I wasn’t

granted any time for play, nor any chance for a mental break, and over time I began to simply go through the motions. Looking back, it was truly a hellish experience.

The only reason I endured it all was a promise my brother and I had made.

Some time after my betrothal, unable to handle the strictness of my princess education, I'd asked my brother to promise me one thing. Oh, incidentally, my brother had come to live with me shortly after I moved to the royal capital. Personally, I'd have preferred to be with my father instead, but alas.

"Should Lord Clarke fancy someone else, you're free to do as you please."

My brother must've pitied me, miserable as I looked trying to push through my daily life. After a year of me begging him daily to make that promise, he reluctantly agreed.

From that point on, I worked very hard with that one goal in mind.

Hoping that someday my fiancé would take interest in another woman, and inwardly spewing venom at those looking to find faults in me, I somehow persevered.

And today, finally, the moment I'd dreamed of had arrived! Thank you, Brie!

To be honest, my first impression of her had been that she was *very* annoying, but now I only thought she was a little annoying. Maybe we could get along, even if I found women like her a bit *grating*.

On second thought, maybe not. She was still annoying.

"Lady Leticia?" called my handmaiden, Lily.

I’d been staring, unmoving, at the doors to the luxurious estate I’d been forced to live in. I was so overcome with emotion over the idea of finally leaving that I was trembling.

In lieu of my parents, it was Lily who had been living at the estate with me as my attendant. I had other servants, of course, but she’d been with me for as long as I could remember. Having her around soothed my heart.

Although, there was just as much torment mixed in with the soothing, given that she’d been incredibly strict when it came to my education. I’d cried a lot over having a tutor—in the form of Lily—even at home.

I smiled as I looked at her face. She had nothing to worry about! I didn’t resent her. I knew everything she did had been under my brother’s orders!

Not understanding my smile, Lily looked at me quizzically. I didn’t feel the need to explain, however, so I simply opened the doors to the estate and stepped inside.

“Welcome home, my lady,” a number of servants said in unison.

“Hello, everyone,” I replied. “I’m moving out!”

The servants, bewildered, echoed my words. “M-Moving out, my lady?”

“I am! Lord Clarke and I are no longer engaged!” I explained, my loud, joyful voice echoing throughout the parlor.

My servants were clearly panicking.

“That...that can’t be,” one said.

“There must be some sort of mistake,” added another.

“Impossible,” a third chimed in.

They were all bewildered and in denial, for some reason.

“It’s true,” I cut in. “Today, Lord Clarke had a bursty... I mean, a *busty* lady at his side. His new partner, apparently!”

As I spoke, Lily chastised me for gesturing with my hands to indicate how full the lady’s chest was. I mean, it was so much bigger than mine!

“I couldn’t possibly win against a bosom like that,” I said.

“My lady,” Lily interrupted in a soothing voice, “breasts have nothing to do with victory.”

Aw, it’s okay, Lily! I’m not pressed about it! Just a tiny *little bit jealous, is all!*

“Either way, as I seem to not be to Lord Clarke’s liking, my brother gave me permission to move out earlier, so it’s all right! Now, please help me get ready! Chop-chop!”

My servants obeyed, despite their troubled countenances.

“Where might you be moving to, my lady?” one asked.

“To an estate in the village of Aberta,” came a reply—not from me.

“Why, brother!” I exclaimed. “You’re back so soon!”

“We have preparations to make,” he stated flatly, quickly retreating to his room.

What a cold man! This was his last day with his sister!

“Aberta Village, huh...” I mused.

I hadn’t exactly been planning to break off my engagement today, so I hadn’t had the chance to really consider where I’d be going now that I was free.

Aberta was a quiet, verdant farming community within House Dorman’s territory. I’d been quite the fishing enthusiast as a child and, since the

village was by a river, I'd been to Aberta many times. A perfect place for me to move to! Leave it to my dear brother to know exactly what his little sister liked.

"Aberta it is! We leave at dawn, so let us hurry and get everything ready!" I told the servants, and they each quickly set about their duties.

I moved closer to my maidservant, who still stood beside me, and put on my best puppy eyes, saying sweetly, "Hey, Lily..."

"No, you may not have snacks this late at night," she said flatly.

"Oh, no, that's not it!" I denied emphatically.

Granted, I wouldn't have *minded* a snack, per se, but that wasn't the point!

"You see, Aberta is quite rural, and I'll only be taking a few servants. I believe we'll be living a great deal more frugally than we are now, and... Well, would you come with me, Lily?" I pleaded.

Lily blinked several times. "Of course I will accompany you, my lady."

"Oh, Lily!" I exclaimed in delight, throwing my arms around her. "Stay with me forever!"

"Forever is a long time," she remarked.

Denied...

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Oh, I'm so happy!

So much so, in fact, that I was tearing up a little. Basking in my joy, I lay sprawled out on the grass in the garden. Yes, *sprawled out.*

You see, no one could chide me for it! I was free to lay in the grass to my heart's content! Which, when engaged to the prince, I hadn't been! This

was the best thing ever!

During my romp, I felt a pang of hunger. I stood, paying no mind to my soiled clothes, and went into the house, calling for my maidservant.

“Lily, I’m going out to fish!” I told her.

“Enjoy, my lady,” she said.

While I was engaged to Lord Clarke, Lily would nag me about every little thing, but since we’d come to this village, she hadn’t chastised me once. I was no longer a noble lady, after all, and so decorum was of no consequence.

All thanks to my brother’s promise.

I skipped and hopped my way to the river in no time at all, and cheerily readied the bait. *Hm, I think I’d like some grilled fish*, I mused, grinning from ear to ear at being able to freely partake in an activity I loved so much.

I’d been all smiles since coming to Alberta. Which, yes, had only been two days ago, but still!

The rural farming village was about a day’s trip by carriage from the capital. There wasn’t a single lady in a frilly dress. Not one gentleman in a tuxedo. Only villagers in lightweight clothing. Likewise, I wore but a simple dress. Much easier to move around in!

There were no fashionable clothing shops, no bookstores with romance novels for girls to swoon over, nowhere to shine one’s shoes. Since carriages hardly ever came by, there was no need for cobblestones, and the roads were simply hardened dirt. Not a single café in sight.

What the village *did* have was a small general store, a grocer, cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, fields, fields, fields, and more fields. In other words, pretty much all nature. And that suited me just fine.

I’d never been fit to be queen in the first place. From a young age, I’d always merrily zipped around, run my mouth, preferred nature to fashion,

run my mouth... Oh, and run my mouth.

And so nothing made me more euphoric than being in the middle of all that nature like I was now.

It's so wonderful to be able to do everything I haven't been able to since age seven! I thought, right as I managed to reel in a trout. Perfect for grilling!

With the tools I'd brought, I gutted, skewered, and sprinkled salt on the fish. To complete the process, I gathered some dry wood and used a flint to start a fire. I loved this kind of thing. Really made me feel like I was living in the wild!

"You look like you're having fun," a voice suddenly echoed.

"Lord Clarke?"

My former fiancé was standing next to me. When did this happen?

That was odd. Why would royalty be out in the sticks like this? Was there some sort of formal procedure to break the engagement? Perhaps some sort of issue with protocol? But such matters were not my concern.

I've always asked my brother to take care of things like this, so would you kindly go to him instead? Don't bother me while I'm out here enjoying my happy country life!

At first I'd thought it must be an incredibly urgent matter, but he only had a handful of attendants with him, all watching from afar. It didn't seem like an important visit. I wasn't sure why he'd come here, but if it had been a serious matter, then no doubt there would've been more people nearby.

I promptly concluded that it couldn't have been a big deal and therefore didn't matter. I reached for the trout, unconcerned. Our engagement was broken, and so what this man did was of no consequence to me.

"How may I help you?" I asked, as a matter of courtesy, before bringing the grilled fish to my mouth. It was delicious, perfectly cooked. Way to go,

me.

“Is that your lunch for the day?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “It’s quite tasty.”

“And you caught it yourself?”

“I did,” I said, with the fish still in my mouth. Nobody could scold me for talking with my mouth full anymore! “I take pride in my fishing skills. And my tree-climbing skills. And my running skills.”

I finished my meal in no time at all, and so I decided to once again set the bait and catch another. *Hmm, what’ll it be next?*

As I hummed to myself, I felt someone nearby. Lord Clarke had taken a seat next to me—I’d been so engrossed in fishing that, for a moment, I’d forgotten all about him.

Wondering why he’d done so, I asked again, “Well? May I help you with anything?”

“No, nothing in particular,” he stated.

“Huh?”

Why had he come if he didn’t need anything?

Confused, I tilted my head slightly, but kept my eyes on the fishing line. I couldn’t let my precious catch get away, after all.

“You’re quite lively,” the prince remarked.

“Freedom does that to someone,” I replied with sincerity. Nothing was more wonderful than freedom, as I had so keenly felt once more upon coming to this village.

“You haven’t changed at all,” he said.

“Pardon?” I said, confused, taking my eyes off the fishing line to stare at Lord Clarke.

“Do you know why I got engaged to you?” he asked.

“I wasn’t interested in knowing, so no.”

The prince’s face fell slightly at my words. You know, I’d never really paid any attention before, but he *was* quite handsome, wasn’t he?

Silky blond hair, swaying in the wind. A straight, tall nose. Skin so flawless and free of blemishes one might wonder if he was really a man. I could see my reflection in those dignified blue eyes of his. Yep, he was quite a looker. The kind of man I could brag to my grandchildren about having been engaged to—if I ever happened to actually marry and have grandchildren in the first place, that is.

I found myself gazing admiringly at him. The tug of a fish’s bite brought me back to reality, and I hurriedly raised my rod, only to see that the fish had gotten away with the bait.

Unfortunate, but failure was part of the thrill of fishing. I once again baited my hook, then cast it into the river.

As he watched me, Lord Clarke started talking.

“Came crashing right down that tree.”

I forgot what he was talking about for a second. After taking a moment to consider, I recalled he’d mentioned something about the reason why we’d gotten engaged. How that related to what he’d just said, however, I had no idea.

Crashing? What did?

I stared at him, as if urging him to go on. With a smile, he continued.

“Ten years ago, you came to the palace alongside Duke Dorman. You climbed a tree in the courtyard, remember? I happened to be passing by, and

you came crashing down right on top of me."

My father had indeed used to go to the palace on business and brought me along. I'd taken a liking to one particular tree in the palace courtyard, and so, at times when my father had been busy with his duties, I'd often climbed it for fun.

Sometimes I'd take a nap up there, so I'd fall from the tree pretty often. I couldn't remember the incident he spoke of, however. *Had* I fallen on someone?

"I was so shocked. You just sat on top of me and laughed."

Another trout caught. Quickly, I went about preparing it as he told his story.

"That was adorable."

I skewered it.

"It was love at first sight. I requested the engagement."

"So it was *your* fault!"

"I'm quite pleased with how things turned out. Aren't you?"

"Of course not! I suffered every day for *ten whole years* because of that!"

Realizing I'd been angrily yelling at the *prince*, I gasped. He wasn't exactly someone one could be this rude to, let alone scream at.

Apprehensive, I glanced at Lord Clarke. He was grinning ear to ear.

What? What's there to be so happy about?

Well, while it *was* pretty odd that he was smiling at a woman who'd just yelled at him, at least he wasn't angry, so...silver linings! I picked up a piece of flint and started a fire to grill my fish.

“But you couldn’t be honest about not wanting the engagement, so you kept sending women my way, didn’t you?”

“You knew?!”

I’d set up numerous honeytraps in the hope that it’d lead to our engagement being broken off. Time and again, I’d sent him all sorts of beautiful women—busty, flat-chested, fat-bottomed, slender...and when he didn’t fall for any of them, I figured maybe he was into cougars or younger girls or something, so I tried those too. More recently, I’d even tried sending a man his way, to no avail. Not once did my traps work! Picky, picky!

“Oh, by the way, you and I are still engaged,” Lord Clarke declared, brushing the sand off his pants as he stood up.

“Whuh?”

I’m under the distinct *impression he just said something absolutely mortifying.*

“I’ll come back for you soon. Feel free to relax until then.”

“P-Pardon?!”

Having ruined my day with his announcement, Lord Clarke merrily went about his way.

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I don’t know how, *but things just took a turn for the worst!*

That much, at least, I could tell. Why that was happening, I didn’t fully grasp, but I was certain I was about to have a very bad time.

So naturally, I immediately rushed back home.

“Lily! Let’s elope!” I pleaded.

“Unfortunately, my lady, I happen to be a woman,” my longtime handmaiden pointed out.

“Love knows no gender!”

“Unfortunately, my lady, there happens to be no love between us.”

“Oh, my heart!”

Lily’s blunt rejection was soul-crushing. I stole a glance at her, but she was absolutely unconcerned. So cold! So cruel!

“Then think of something!” I demanded.

“For what purpose, exactly?” she asked.

Oh. Right. I’d proposed to Lily immediately upon returning home, without explaining what it’d all been about.

“For some reason my engagement has not, in fact, been broken off,” I said.

“I believe I told you so, yes,” she retorted.

“But that night at the ball he had this boingy, grating lady on his arm when he came in!”

“I’m not sure what you mean by ‘boingy,’ but...perhaps there was a reason for it?”

“What kind of reason?”

“I don’t know.”

“Useless...” I muttered.

Lily glared sharply at me.

“I-I’m just kidding, Lily!” I said hastily, trying to make amends. “You’re the most useful handmaiden of them all!”

“Very well, then,” Lily said, clearly dissatisfied but begrudgingly accepting my excuse.

As I sighed in relief, someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

An elderly man—the only butler in this tiny estate—solemnly stepped in.

“You have a visitor, my lady,” he announced.

“Oh? Who is it?”

The people in the village shouldn’t have known about my presence just yet, and I’d moved here without letting anyone know, so I had no idea who it might be. Well, Lord Clarke somehow knew, so...so much for that.

“Master Nadir,” said the butler.

“My brother?”

I’d just seen him two days ago. What could he possibly want? *Strange*, I thought. Still, I had a question for him.

“I’ll be right out,” I said.

***

And there stood my brother.

“Are you well?” he asked.

“Brother! What’s this about my engagement still standing?!”

My tiny new home may have been decrepit, but it was still a noble's estate. It had a parlor, as was proper, and it was there that I pressed my brother, who sat gracefully sipping tea, for an answer.

"It would appear His Highness has not, in fact, broken it off," he explained.

His words matched what Lord Clarke had said earlier at the river.

"What?! But back then he said we were no longer—"

"Try and remember, Leticia. Did he categorically state your engagement was broken off?"

As my brother said, I recalled that night. Lord Clarke had walked in with Brie, said he couldn't keep me company that day, and then I asked, "Does that mean our betrothal is..." to which he replied "It does." So he said *that*, but...

"He...did not explicitly say our engagement was broken off," I admitted dejectedly.

"Indeed he did not," my brother agreed.

"What's going on, then?!"

"It would appear he never intended to break it off in the first place."

"What?!"

So what had the whole thing about accompanying Brie been about?!

"He wanted to make you jealous, it seems."

"J-Jealous?"

"Yes. As in, upset he was showing interest in—"

“I know what ‘jealous’ means!” I cut in before my brother could finish his unhelpful explanation.

He grinned widely at me. “His Highness fancies you, it seems.”

“He did say something like that earlier...”

“You never paid him any attention, so he wanted to test you,” he explained.

“And even through his test I paid him no mind,” I retorted. I’d never had the slightest interest in him.

“Indeed. But it would seem he was quite happy you actually looked at his face for once.”

That had to be about our conversation by the river. It was true I hadn’t ever looked at his face. I didn’t want to marry him, after all.

“Huh? How do you know about that when it *just* happened?!” I demanded.

“I was the one who brought His Highness here,” he said nonchalantly.

“You *what*?!”

So *that* was why he’d shown up so quickly!

Annoyed at my brother’s indiscretion, I cast him a glare, but he was unbothered.

“He said that now that you have a reason to get to know him, he wouldn’t mind it if you only fell for him after the marriage. He was, however, concerned about how quickly you ran off to one of our territories, so he’s making arrangements.”

“What arrangements?”

“For the wedding ceremony.”

“Nooo!” I cried out in despair, holding my head.

This was the worst thing that could possibly have happened. I thought I’d gotten away!

At this rate, I was doomed to be dragged back into a life of no fishing, no lying sprawled on the grass, no running around!

“Do something, brother!” I pleaded.

“I cannot.”

“Anything!”

“I cannot,” he repeated.

“Noooooooooo!”

My brother watched gleefully as I shrieked. Of course he did. This suited him perfectly. Being involved with the royal family and climbing his way up the social ladder had always been his dream.

“Um, have you considered, perhaps, *not ignoring me*?” a female voice called out, interrupting my fit of despair.

Looking at the source of the voice, I saw a woman sitting opposite my brother.

“Ah, yes, I’d forgotten all about it,” my brother spoke up. “She said she wanted to see you, Leticia, so I brought her here.”

“You *forgot*?!” the woman snapped.

Wait. I remembered her.

“Be... Buh... Brie!” I exclaimed.

“It’s *Brianna*!” she protested, firmly reminding me of her name.

She no longer looked like she was trying to seduce the first pair of pants that crossed her path.

“So, Brie,” I said, “I don’t mean to *grill* you, but you look different.”

“*Bri-an-na*!” she reminded me yet again.

“What happened to the croquettish—I mean, *coquettish* act?”

“I’m over it!”

Oh. She is?

Shocking.

“I thought I had a chance when the prince approached me, you know! Turns out, he’s head over heels for you! I was just part of his little test. What a joke!” Brie clenched her fist as she spoke. “*And* because of that whole kerfuffle, *my* punishment was to take those horrid princess lessons for who knows what reason! They make no sense! They’re so strict! What’s up with that?! Who scolds people for happening to yawn?! Isn’t yawning just a thing people do?!”

“It sure is,” I agreed.

“I knew you’d understand!” Brie exclaimed, clasping my hand. We were now kindred spirits, apparently. “You’re incredible,” she said. “You survived *ten years* of that?! I could *never*. I barely lasted a day.”

“Don’t give up!” I encouraged her. “You can do it!”

“No can do!”

“I mean, you could become the crown princess!”

“Not a chance in hell! The prince has categorically stated that if he marries anyone but you, he will not have children!”

He said what*?!*

“It would seem His Highness has no interest in marrying anyone else,” my brother said with an amused smile. “I would suggest you give up.”

“Noooooooo!”

Give me back my peace and quiet!

***

I should just run away.

It was all I could think to do. After the horrible news I'd heard from my brother at noon, running away felt like my only option.

Fortunately, I was at a remote village within my family's own territory, with little to no surveillance. Nothing like the veritable fortress of an estate where I'd been made to live in the capital. If I'd tried to escape from there, several servants would've stood between me and freedom.

But from here, I could flee!

I packed the bare essentials and a generous amount of money. Even I, a sheltered young noblewoman, was not so foolish as to think I could make my escape while penniless. Money was of the essence, no doubt. Which, incidentally, happened to be the reason I even had money in the first place: I kept a hidden stash ready to run away the first chance I got.

Okay. I'm ready, I psyched myself up.

I could live as a peasant. In fact, maybe it suited me better. I could become a fisherwoman. Yes.

My preparations taken care of, I placed a hand on the window. If I left out the front door, someone might've spotted me. A window was the ideal escape path for a runaway. That was common sense.

I opened the window, took my luggage, and jumped out. From the second floor, mind you, so my ankle complained a bit, but no problem, no problem!

Off I go!

"No you don't."

As I tried to run, someone stepped on the hem of my dress, making my legs tangle around it and sending me tumbling to the ground, face first. The impact made me see stars.

“If you run, *I’ll* be the one stuck with those princess lessons!”

I looked up, and there stood Brie, the culprit of my fall, her foot still planted firmly on my dress. From this angle, she seemed to breast even more boobily...

“I thought you sympathized with me earlier today!” I protested.

“I certainly did, but not to the point I would let you run away,” she said.

“Wow! And here I thought we might’ve bonded the teeniest tiniest bit!”

“That’s not what this is about and you know it!”

I tried to pull my hem free of her foot, but it didn’t budge at all. What leg strength!

“They told me that if you go back, I’ll be free of these princess lessons. I won’t let you escape!”

Oh. So the reason she came with my brother was to make sure I couldn’t escape.

“Just look the other way!” I suggested.

“And why would I do that?!”

“You’ll be queen in my stead! Wouldn’t that be great?”

“I already said I’m over it!”

She was a tough one. In many ways, actually, since I couldn’t even pull my legs free no matter how hard I tried. What amazing strength! Was she secretly jacked?!

While all of that was going on, someone else joined us.

“Leticia, would you stop making a racket in the middle of the night?”

“Brother! Do something about Brie!”

“How many times must I tell you it’s *Brianna*?!”

Brie, who always kindly corrected me whenever I called her Brie, showed no intention of letting go of me at my brother’s arrival.

I see. So they’re accomplices *in this!*

I racked and racked my tiny brain cells. There had to be *something* I could do! Anything! Uncomfortably aware of the cold beads of sweat slowly dripping down my forehead, I tried to come up with a plan. I came up empty, however. My brother was approaching me now, and I knew that if he caught me, it was over.

Out of options, I went with the one stupid thing I could come up with. In a final act of desperation, I yelled, “If you let me go, I’ll give you my brother’s hand in marriage!”

Brie stared down at me, her foot loosening slightly.

“What was that?”

Yes! A light at the end of the tunnel!

“He’s the heir to a duchy, twenty-two years old, brilliant, athletic, tall *and* quite handsome! It would be no exaggeration to claim your future would be guaranteed! I mean, yes, his personality could use a *little* work, but if you can look past that, he’s a great catch! What do you say?!”

“Deal!”

Brie removed her foot, and immediately turned around to slowly approach my brother. I stood, wiping the sweat from my brow.

“Thank you!” I exclaimed. “I won’t forget you two! Brother, have a wonderful love life!”

“H-Hey!” my brother protested. “Leticia!”

“To freedom!” I yelled, bolting away.

My brother’s protests echoed loudly behind me, but I didn’t care. *Brie, if you want to get hitched, a shotgun wedding is the best way to go about it! I wish you luck!*

I ran, my steps light and nimble, reveling in the fact I’d be able to live free of burdens and responsibilities. I was so happy I could cry! Somehow, I managed not to, and kept running.

That is, until an arm reached out from behind me and wrapped around my waist. My momentum was such that I very nearly doubled over.

Had my brother caught up with me?

Moving my hand away from my mouth—I had very nearly retched from the impact—I looked behind me…and there he stood. My still-fiancé whom I hadn’t managed to break away from after all.

“Lettie.”

His handsome face in the dark was...kind of creepy, actually, I thought.

Lord Clarke leaned in to speak close to my ear. “White is *the* color for a wedding dress, of course, but what color would you like to wear for the reception?”

Was *this* the time to talk about that?!

***

“Let me goooooo!” I screamed, resisting with all my might.

It didn’t help at all. Lord Clarke continued to carry me over his shoulder, unimpeded.

In the end, he brought me back to my modest estate, smiled at the astonished servants, and ordered them to prepare to move.

I’d just moved here two days ago! And now I had to move *again*? Come on!

That wasn’t fair! At all! Also, my poor servants! I did raise such protests, but they fell on deaf ears and preparations for the move proceeded apace.

“You told me I could have some freedom!” I complained.

“And you did have *some* freedom, no?” Lord Clarke retorted.

There was a huge difference between his definition of “some” and mine!

“Put me down!”

“So you can run away?”

“Then at least carry me some other way!”

“So you can resist better?”

Yes! But still!

We’d been going back and forth like this for some time, and still I remained in this position.

“Well, then,” Lord Clarke said to me, having finished issuing orders, “let us depart,” With that, he began to carry me to the front door.

Where is he taking me?!

The servants opened the door for us, and there stood my brother, disheveled, along with Brie. I’d never seen him in such a state. What had she *done* to him?

Looking quite worn out, my brother said to Lord Clarke, “The carriage is here, Your Highness. I will handle the rest.”

No! Don’t handle the rest! Don’t handle anything at all!

I struggled one final time, flailing my arms and legs, to no avail whatsoever. If I'd known this would happen, I'd have worked out more!

"Li-Lily should come too—"

"No," my brother cut in, summarily dismissing my desperate request. "You've known one another for too long. I don't want her to fall for your pleas out of sympathy. Absolutely not."

"Y-You monster!"

"Say what you will."

Holding me down, my brother put me in the carriage. Lord Clarke climbed in shortly after, and, without delay, locked the door.

I tried to pry it open, but of course, it didn't budge. From the window, I could see my brother laughing. Brie looked exhausted and haggard. When she met my eye, she quietly shook her head. Really, what *had* happened?

Spotting Lily outside, I waved frantically at her. She waved back.

No! I'm waving because I want you to help *me, Lily!*

She seemed to be saying something as she waved. I squinted, trying to read her lips.

Wait, "be happy"?! No! What am I, a blushing bride you're sending off?! Don't say that!

But my thoughts didn't reach her, and the carriage departed.

***

Locked in a carriage. With Lord Clarke.

My hands were sweaty with anxiety. How had it come to this?

With vacant eyes, I absentmindedly gazed out the window.

The carriage headed to the capital at a steady pace.. I remembered it well—it was the same road I'd traveled two days ago. I'd left the morning after the ball, spent yesterday resting, because I was tired, and had just started enjoying my country life today.

And what a happy day it had been.

I found myself tearing up.

Ah, Lily. Happiness simply happens...and it simply vanishes.

Lesson learned, I shifted my gaze to the handsome prince sitting before me.

With his long legs crossed and his calm gaze fixed on me, illuminated only by the gentle glow of the carriage lamp, he looked so gorgeous I couldn't help but sigh. The dim lighting only made him look even more alluring.

"Do you hate me?" he asked.

"Pardon?"

"For taking you away like this."

Well, at least he seemed to have some awareness that kidnapping me like this wasn't exactly pleasant.

"No," I replied.

It wasn't a lie. I didn't hate him. I just didn't love him either.

I stole a glance at him and saw a delighted smile play upon his features. Maybe he'd misunderstood? I hadn't said I *loved* him, I only didn't *hate* him!

Flustered, I figured I should correct this misconception, and looked him straight in the eyes. He was gazing at me and smiling, illuminated by the

lamp, and he looked so seductive that my heart felt tight, and my protest caught in my throat.

I'd seen his face a million times before. Why was it suddenly captivating me so? Weird.

My nerves were shot. I felt like it was the first time I'd ever met him, even though we'd talked so many times already—we'd even danced together!

"You seem to be a little interested in me now," he said, noticing my blatant attempt at distraction.

"Wh-What?" I stammered.

"I said, you seem to be interested in me," he repeated, tilting his head.

I swallowed. "N-No I'm not."

"But you *do* finally see me as a man now, don't you?"

My breath hitched in my chest at his question.

It was true that I hadn't quite seen him as a man up until now. Yes, I saw him as my fiancé, but in my heart, that's all he was. Call it rude of me, but I had never truly thought of him as a *person*.

Was I really so callous?

Confronting that ugly side of me was a bit of a shock. Lord Clarke seemed concerned as he moved closer to me.

By the time I noticed, he was already sitting next to me.

Gently, he took my hand, where it sat on my knee. My shoulder jerked at the touch.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

“Uhhhhh, um...”

“Yes?”

He tilted his head, and an indescribably pleasant scent wafted my way. Did all men smell like this?!

“Y-Y-Y-You’re,” I stammered, “you’re kind of close!”

“Am I?”

“Yes!”

Despite my sharp reply, he showed no intention of moving. Why not?!

His soft gaze, fixed on me, made my heart skip a beat.

I realized now that this was the first time a man who wasn’t dancing with me had held my hand. *And* the first time one had sat this close to me!

My first close encounter with the opposite sex had my heart pounding painfully in my chest.

“Uhhhhh, um!”

“Yes?”

“Can, can you...move...?” I asked, in a voice so small it was almost a whisper, my agitation clear as day.

I was sure he could tell, because he simply smiled merrily and stayed right where he was.

“I’m so happy,” he remarked, his tone gentle.

“Huh?” I replied dumbly, not understanding what he meant.

“Finally, we can look into each other’s eyes and speak like this,” he explained, his voice overflowing with joy.

I felt a sharp pang in my heart. “W-We’ve spoken while looking into each other’s eyes before!”

“We have,” he agreed. “But they weren’t emotional conversations, were they? You didn’t really *see* me, did you?”

Oh. He knew.

My chest still fluttering, I broke out into a cold sweat.

“M-My apologies,” I stammered.

“It’s quite all right,” he replied, stroking the top of my guilt-ridden head.

Then he brought his face closer to mine, and I heard a cute little lip-smacking sound on my cheek.

When it dawned on me what had just happened, I brought a hand to my now bright red face.

“Wh-Wh-Wh...” I mumbled.

“It’ll be a little while before we arrive.”

“H-Huh?”

“We should get some rest.”

Lord Clarke took a blanket from the carriage and pulled it over us both, petting my head again.

“Good night, Lettie,” he said, closing his eyes.

For a while I was dumbfounded, my fingertips lingering on the cheek he’d kissed... Then I snapped back to reality.

“Like hell I can sleep now!”

Snugly wrapped in the blanket next to me, the prince let out a little chuckle.

***

I was brought back.

My brain fuzzy from sleep deprivation, I took a peek outside. The carriage had arrived at a location quite familiar to me. Unfortunately, it wasn't my family's estate in the capital.

"Why are we at the palace?" I asked.

"Oh, there are various reasons," the prince replied. "Our preparations for the ceremony will take a while longer, besides."

"Ehhh..."

As I wept in despair, Lord Clarke, sitting next to me, petted my knee. *Hey! Don't take advantage of my confused state!*

"Lettie, you'll ruin your beautiful face with all that weeping."

And whose fault is that?!

"I wanna go back..."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," he said apologetically, petting my head.

I didn't want an apology. I wanted to leave!

He'd forced me to come back just as I was sighing dreamily about my idyllic country life! *And* to the palace, to boot! My life was in shambles.

Taking my hand as I continued to weep, Lord Clarke began to lead me somewhere. *Where are we going? Are we getting married already?! No, wait, he said the preparations aren't done yet, right?*

In spite of my frantic resistance, I was easily dragged along without a clue what would happen next. That was *it*! I was going to start doing marathon training!

I kept my gaze fixed on the ground, not wanting to acknowledge the fact I'd been brought back to the palace.

"Lettie," Lord Clarke called out. "Lift your head."

And so I did, reluctantly. What I saw made my jaw drop.

"Riv..."

"Mm-hm."

"River... There's a river."

A stream crossed through the palace courtyard. I could see fish swimming beneath the surface.

That had definitely not been there last time.

"I had it made."

Oh! Oh, the *money* that must've cost! How powerful the royal family was!

Not that I cared.

As I peered into the stream, marveling that something so beautiful could be made in such a short amount of time, a fish leapt up with a splash.

"You like rivers, yes? You can fish here."

Yes, I liked rivers. And I liked fishing. Loved it, even.

I was surprised he knew about my interests until I remembered I'd declared them quite loudly at the ball. And I realized I didn't know what *his* interests were at all.

“So, from now on, you should do what you like when you like it. You’ll have diplomatic duties, yes, but not that many. Your princess education is almost perfect, so let’s wrap it up.”

Shocked, I tore my gaze away from the river to stare at him. “That’s not possible, though.”

“Oh, it’s fine, don’t worry,” he assured me.

“Is it? Queens can’t just do whatever they want...”

“My mother does plenty of what she wants.”

It was true. The queen had always been rather free-spirited. She was careful to keep it a secret from the people, but I knew she often snuck into the castle town for fun.

But was such freedom truly possible? Knowing how strict the princess lessons were, I couldn’t help but doubt what he was saying. Lord Clarke must’ve picked up on my feelings, because he offered me a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I won’t let anyone object. You’ll have proper permission.”

“Whose?” I asked.

“His Majesty’s,” he explained.

“Eep!” I yelped in surprise.

“All I had to do was announce that if I were to marry anyone but you, I wouldn’t have children. And so, if you ran away, there would be no royal heirs. That got him to agree quite readily.”

Blackmail. That was *blackmail*.

“So let’s be wed,” he insisted. “It’s not a bad deal. You’ll live a more carefree life than you would if you married a lower-ranked nobleman.

You'll have to marry sooner or later regardless, so why not take advantage of this excellent investment?"

He must still be holding a grudge because I'd called him a bad debt.

I took a good look at his face as he leaned in closer to me. Beautiful, clear blue eyes. Golden hair, swaying in the wind. It struck me then, inexplicably, that yes, he was indeed a prince.

"I don't want to be tied down!"

At the last moment, I put my hand over his mouth, halting the approach of his lips. Lord Clarke seemed resentful, but he had no reason to be. I was the one who should've been resentful!

"And what's not to your satisfaction?"

Pulling my hand away, I said, "I don't want to marry into the royal family."

The one light at the end of my miserable tunnel of princess lessons had been the hope that one day, our engagement would be broken off. It would've been the ultimate revenge against the people of the palace and my brother, who had forced me into this betrothal to the prince. Even if he told me I would've been free as queen, it was just too much for me to swallow. I'd held this grudge so many years—it couldn't just vanish so easily!

If I accepted this now, the misery I'd spent all these years wallowing in would be for nothing!

Just thinking of the past made me angry.

Seeing me huff, Lord Clarke looked exasperated, as though he were dealing with a toddler's tantrum. That only annoyed me more.

"You'll just have to deal with it."

"No."

At my refusal to acquiesce, the prince sighed. “A shame, Leticia,” he said, picking me back up and turning back to the inside of the palace.

I had a bad feeling about this.

“Put me down!” I demanded.

My heart had fluttered when he came close to me in the carriage, but now the pounding in my chest was nothing like that. I broke out in a cold sweat.

Flailing my arms and legs with all my strength didn’t help one bit. Ugh!

He took me to a secluded room deep into the palace.

“Lettie, stay here until the ceremony preparations are complete,” he said with a smile on that handsome face of his, and ruthlessly closed the door behind him.

Immediately, I started yanking on the door handle.

“Nooo! It won’t open!”

Duchess Leticia Dorman, seventeen years old. Locked up for the first time in my life.

***

I spent the night locked away in that room in the palace.

It had been furnished with a bed, a table, a bathroom, a toilet, a washbasin...pretty much all the essentials. A well-thought-out prison.

Of course, like a proper holding cell, the door would only open from the outside. I suspected it had been built for this exact purpose, but I hadn’t asked. I knew the answer would scare me.

I’d searched for an exit here and there, but I couldn’t find anything. Sleep-deprived, I’d given up quickly, taken a bath, and gone to sleep. I was

so exhausted that I'd slept soundly despite the situation I was in. Now, I was wide awake.

I got out of bed, and changed out of my pajamas and into a dressing gown. Even clothes had been prepared for me. The preparations had been so thorough, it was impressive; this had to have been their plan from the start. Would it have been impolite to ask how the clothes could fit me so perfectly, I wondered?

A knock.

"Madam, are you awake?"

"I'm no madam!"

"Please pardon my indiscretion. Lady Leticia, I have brought your breakfast."

Saying this, a young handmaiden, around my own age, came into the room with a meal.

"Please eat it while it's warm," she said.

Looking at the breakfast spread out on the table, I was suddenly struck by hunger. With no intention to resist now, I obediently took my seat.

It was a bit awkward to eat with the girl staring at me, but the palace food *was* quite delicious, and I polished it off quickly. If I stayed, I could eat like this every day... The thought made my resolve waver a little. Or not. Probably not.

"Thank you," I said.

"Allow me to clean up," she replied.

Briskly, she went about doing just that. When she was done, she loaded the dishes onto her cart and knocked on the door to leave. Slowly, the door opened.

“I’m so sorry!” I yelled, and body-slammed the handmaiden from behind. She lost her balance, and tumbled forward. Her fall was more dramatic than I’d anticipated, which did make me feel guilty. “I’m sorry! I really am! I have nothing against you, I just want freedom!”

Pushing my guilt to the back of my mind, I pried the door fully open and bolted out. Servants stared at me, befuddled, as I darted past.

The more I ran, the more of a sense I got of where I was in the palace. In the ten years I’d been coming here, I’d managed to get a good grasp of the castle’s layout for emergencies like this.

Those ten years had paid off! Good job, me!

Patting myself on the back, I leaned over a hallway window, and from there jumped straight onto a nearby tree.

Success! I thought.

Incorrectly.

“Leticia?” From below, the last voice I wanted to hear called out to me.

Nervously, I lowered my gaze.

“Eep!”

Why was Lord Clarke here?!

Paying no mind to my confusion, he offered me a charming smile. He was as good-looking as ever.

“I didn’t watch you for ten years for nothing, you know.”

The man had a complete grasp of most of my behavior patterns. Terrifying.

Standing below me, smiling, simply waiting for me to come down, he made no effort to shake the tree, or order someone else to handle it.

From my perch, I tried to find other escape routes, but the next nearest tree was too far to leap to, and I couldn't jump to the ground from this height. Out of options, I glared at Lord Clarke, who watched me with amusement.

"This reminds me of the day we met," he said, gazing happily at me.

"No it doesn't," I retorted, drawing a chuckle out of him.

The day we'd met, I'd fallen from a tree! I hadn't been clinging to it like a monkey! Or... Wait, had I? Had he fallen in love with my monkey-ness?!

I spent a while glaring at him from atop the tree, but eventually my arms gave out, and I slowly slid down the trunk. I didn't want to look at Lord Clarke, so when I reached the bottom, I just kept holding on to the tree, like a big cicada.

"Leticia," he called out, lifting me up from behind.

Ah, my resistance had been futile. Again.

He tucked me under his arm, and I trembled in fear as he peered into my face.

"I suppose I ought to make it clearer that you have no escape, Lettie," he whispered merrily. Yikes!

"Heeelp!" I cried out in his grasp.

The staff just gazed at us both warmly.

Come on! Help me!

***

And I'd been brought back.

"Ah, the agony..."

The handmaiden stood nearby, refraining from touching me as I wallowed in sorrow on the fainting couch I'd been provided. Gently, I brought the freshly brewed tea to my lips.

"Oh! Tasty," I said.

"I'm glad," the girl replied, smiling. It was the same handmaiden I'd charged earlier.

"I'm sorry I ran into you earlier. Are you hurt?"

"No, my lady. I fell onto the carpet."

I'd tried to aim it so she'd drop onto the carpet, but only she could know whether she was really okay. Wouldn't she be sore where I hit her, at least? I felt pretty bad.

"I really am sorry. I don't have anything at all against you, and yet I caused you pain just because I wanted to run away..."

"Please, don't apologize so much, my lady. I'm fine!" she said, bouncing. How cute!

Feeling warm and fuzzy, I asked her a question.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen, my lady."

"And around my height," I remarked.

"It would seem so, if we stand side by side," she noted.

"And weight," I added.

"I did finally manage to lose weight recently!"

"And we have the same hair color."

“We match,” she agreed.

“And eye color.”

She’d been cheerily replying each time, but suddenly she hesitated. When she spoke up again, she seemed like she’d figured it out.

“My lady, what’s on your mind?” she asked.

“Something wonderful,” I declared.

“It is most certainly *not* wonderful, my lady!” she protested.

“It’s okay! Just...put these on quietly, if you don’t mind...”

“I knew it wasn’t wonderful!”

As she made a fuss, I slowly approached her.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Just stay quiet...okay?”

“No, *not* okay!” she protested again, slowly backing off as I wiggled my fingers at her.

We had a glaring contest for a bit.

“It’s fine!” I assured her. “You just need to act as my body double once. Or twice.”

“It is *not* fine!”

“If everything goes well, you might even catch the prince’s eye!”

“That will absolutely not happen!”

“But you look so much like me!”

“Just because we have matching hair and eye colors doesn’t mean we look alike at all!”

“Is it not enough to have similar hair and eye colors? How else do you tell people apart?”

“My lady! You can only tell people apart by their hair and eye colors?!”

“I’m not good with faces.”

“Be better, then!”

“Oh! By the way, what’s your name?”

“It’s Maria!”

I inched ever closer as we talked. Maria. Even her name was cute!

“Help!” she yelled out, pounding on the door. “Somebody please help me!”

“I haven’t even done anything yet!” I protested.

“But you will!”

“I mean, yes, but still!”

“I knew it!”

Her eyes filled with tears as she continued pounding on the door. It was quite sturdy, so her hands must have hurt.

“Just accept it,” I suggested. “It’ll be easier that way.”

“No!”

“Aw, come on. Don’t take it so seriously.”

“It is *quite* serious!”

I attempted to pry the unexpectedly stubborn Maria from the door, but she held on firmly to the handle.

“It’ll be just for a little bit! A tiny bit.”

“And that tiny bit will spell the end of my life!”

“Come on. Don’t overthink it. Okay?”

“No! No, no, no, nuh-uh!”

My *goodness* she was stubborn. And that grip strength! Was this what they called “hysterical strength,” I wondered?

“Nooo! Heeelp!” she cried out, particularly loudly.

Wow! What lungs! My ears hurt!

“Oof!”

The door opened, striking Maria, who had been clinging to it, right in the face. And I, who had been clinging to Maria, tumbled back onto the soft carpet with her.

“What are you *doing*, Lettie?”

Noooooooo!

As I trembled in fear, Maria sprung back to her feet, begging Lord Clarke for help.

“Please! Help me!”

“Lettie,” the prince began, “what were you trying to do?”

“She wanted me to pose as her! Because we’re the same age, and body type, and hair color, and all that!”

This snitch!

“Lettie.”

“Eek!”

That smile! That terrifying smile!

“Why were you trying to get her to pose as you?”

“Uh, um, you fell for me at first sight,” I stammered, “so I thought, I thought, if I found someone who looks like me, maybe that, you know, that would...work...out...”

The words died in my throat when Lord Clarke’s temples began to twitch.

“I see. Lettie, you don’t understand my feelings, do you?” he asked, with that refreshing smile of his.

“Um, no, that’s not...”

“Why don’t I tell you what I like about you? Slowly. Clearly.”

“N-No, you don’t have to.”

“How many hours will that take, I wonder?”

“You *really* don’t have to!” I insisted.

I looked up hurriedly to see if I could find an escape route, but noThe heavy doors were securely closed.

And Maria was gone!

She ran away!

“Now, then, let’s have a nice chat. Just the two of us.”

“N-Nooooooooooo!”

Ignoring my shriek, Lord Clarke pulled me into an embrace.

***

Finally, my torment was over.

Lying slumped on the fainting couch, I looked outside. The sun had completely set.

Earlier, Lord Clarke had spent an eternity enumerating every little thing about me that he liked, that he found attractive. By dinner, he still wasn't finished yet, and so we ate dinner here while he continued to list things off. And then, as if trying to seduce me, he whispered about my beautiful eyes and my beautiful ears, and all sorts of things that were terribly harmful to my heart. Then, finally satisfied, he left.

Wow. I guess he really *was* in love with me.

I hadn't seen any of the signs before running away, but apparently he'd actually been courting me for some time.

I had no memory of this, but apparently, he'd always done it during teatime between my lessons. I didn't care, so I never listened at all back then, and just nodded along instead. He seemed sad when I told him that, but at the time I'd really just wanted to go back to my previous life. Breaking off the engagement was the only thing on my mind, so obviously I didn't care about much else.

"Right? Why would I care? You agree, don't you?" I asked, seeking some validation.

"No, madam, I feel sorry for His Highness," said Maria, denying me said validation.

Incidentally, Maria had returned to serve us dinner. It was her job, so she couldn't leave, she'd said. Being a handmaiden sounded hard.

"Although I will say that not noticing ten years of courtship is impressive," she noted.

"Well, yes, but I was just like, 'Oh, he's still talking,' and it all went in one ear and out the other."

“You really had no interest in His Highness, huh?”

“All I was interested in was freedom.”

“Well, at least you’re honest.”

“Thank you.”

Maria made a face at me. I knew she wasn’t actually praising me, okay?

“Did your brother not say anything about His Highness to you, madam?”

“I mean, he did say things like, ‘The prince said he loves you again today,’ but I thought he was just making it up because he really wanted me to get married, so I ignored that too.”

She looked at me in silence. I rather wished she wouldn’t.

“I did feel a little bad for you, madam,” she said, “but now I think you’ve brought this upon yourself.”

“What? No!” I exclaimed. “Feel sorry for me! Sympathize! Empathize!”

“No. This is the result of your own actions.”

“Okay, maybe *a little*, but keeping people prisoner isn’t right either!”

“Based on what I’ve heard so far, I can’t comment on that.”

“I mean, think about it! Nobody should jump straight to confinement! First they should try whispering sweet nothings, then express their affection, and then all sorts of...various...”

Oh.

“His Highness did whisper, didn’t he?” Maria said, as if sensing my realization.

“He did, didn’t he?” I echoed.

“And His Highness did express his affections quite a bit, no?”

“I suppose he did, yes.”

“And when that didn’t work, he tried to keep you from escaping.”

“He did...” I mused, inadvertently nodding in agreement. Wait! No! I didn’t mean to agree! “But even then! Locking someone up isn’t normal! Sure, I didn’t *care* about the prince, and I *wanted* to break off our engagement, and I *didn’t* pay attention to what he talked about at all, *yes*, but surely there was another way!”

There *had* to have been a different method than this! Some other way to attract my interest, right? Right...?

I looked up at Maria, wanting her to agree with me. She shook her head instead.

“I believe he exhausted all other alternatives.”

“No... He couldn’t have... Right? No way...”

“I don’t personally care.”

Ouch.

“You were kind until moments ago! Why are you being so harsh to me now?”

“Well, I *am* seventeen—that’s the time to be in love with love! I wish to support Lord Clarke’s love.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I feel sorry for him.”

“There are plenty of reasons to feel sorry for *me*!”

“I would say there aren’t that many.”

“Oh, my heart!” I exclaimed, pretending to sob. I glanced over at Maria. She just looked at me in silence, utterly unconvinced by my crocodile tears. I stopped pretending and lifted my head. “Okay, fine. I’m the bad guy. Whatever. Can you stop calling me ‘madam?’”

“That is what you are, madam.”

“I’m not married yet!”

“When you *are* married, madam, you will be Her Highness, but until then, it’s been decided we are to call you madam.”

“And who decided that?”

“His Highness.”

I slammed my hand on the table. “I *knew* he was behind this!”

Unfazed by my outburst, Maria looked at the clock on the wall and courteously nodded at me.

“Now then, madam, I must excuse myself. Please rest well.”

“I am *not* a ‘madam!’”

“Good night,” she said, and left the room without correcting herself.

“Good night...”

Why was *everyone* on Lord Clarke’s side? Did Team Leticia have to be just me? How was that fair?

Sighing, I looked out the window. The stars twinkled in the dark of night, and the moon was shining bright.

“A full moon, huh...” I murmured, shifting my gaze back to my room.

Hm?

I looked around, shiftily.

“I’m...alone,” I realized.

There were no guards in the room at all.

“This is my chance to get out!” I exclaimed, and immediately sprung into action.

First, I made sure no one was near the window. Then, I procured a hefty tome, wrapped it in my nightgown, and swung it around.

I’ve got this!

With a loud crash, the window shattered, and I hurried to climb out before any soldiers could come.

My window escape was a success.

The fluttering nightgown made it hard to run, but I still took off as fast as I possibly could toward the castle gates.

“Yes! I’m free!” I shouted.

And then an arm wrapped around my waist, and pulled me into an embrace from behind. It sank into my stomach, sending a wave of nausea washing over me.

Retching, I covered my mouth.

Déja vu.

I hesitantly looked over my shoulder, and there he was.

“Lettie.”

Yikes, I thought, grimacing. His handsome face looked quite frightening in the dark.

Lord Clarke leaned in close to my ear.

“Do you think a diamond necklace would go well with your wedding dress? Pearl, perhaps?”

Was this the time to talk about that?!

***

“How many more rooms like this are there?” I pondered, looking out the window.

Said window was too small for a person to fit through. I’d been moved to this room after what happened last time. My soul, shattered. My life, ruined.

Not paying any mind at all to my sighs, Maria poured tea into a cup.

“Several, it would seem. Many nobles have tried to defy the royal family over the years, and so these rooms were prepared to handle them. They’re not in use right now, though.”

“Oh, so they have a *history*,” I remarked.

“At least no one’s ever died inside them. Supposedly.”

“Does that mean people have died *outside* them?”

Wait, no! I didn’t want to think about that! The last thing I needed was a haunted palace!

“Ooh, that sounds exciting!” Brie laughed, as if she’d just heard some fun gossip about other people, and brought a pastry to her lips. *My* pastry, by the way.

“Why are you even here?” I asked.

“I have been selected as a conversation partner for the incarcerated future queen-to-be.”

“What?! Do I *look* like I need a partner? Go home!”

“It is my job, you see, so I can’t go home until the end of my shift.”

“Wait, they’re *paying* you?! For something this pointless?! This is a waste of taxpayer money!”

“Say what you will,” Brie replied nonchalantly. “Look. Money makes the world go round, hmm?”

“Maria!” I exclaimed indignantly. “Don’t listen to her! Cover your ears! She’ll rot your brain!” I tried to cover the handmaiden’s ears to protect her innocence from such corrupt ideas.

“Money does indeed make the world go round,” Maria agreed.

“Maria!” I exclaimed in horror, too late to save her from Brie’s *unique* perspective. I turned to the corruptor, saying, “Hey! Stop that! You’re a bad influence! She’s not like you!”

“You say that like *I’m* the weird one here,” Brie retorted, eating another pastry, showing *no* restraint whatsoever.

I knew it was free food, but honestly!

“Let me know if you see a ghost,” she remarked.

“If you marry the prince, you can see them yourself!” I replied.

“I would rather not,” she said, flatly refusing my suggestion. “I’d give up halfway through those princess lessons. Besides, if I became a princess, I’d just cause all sorts of diplomatic problems.”

“You’ll get the hang of it!” I exclaimed in encouragement. “You’ll be perfect in ten years or so.”

“In ten years or so, I’ll be well past marriage age!”

Brie loudly slurped her tea. Rude! She must have noticed my judgmental gaze, though, because she pulled the cup away from her lips. “See? I can’t even do the basics right. No matter how carefully I sip, I can’t drink as silently as you can!”

“You’ll be able to in ten years!”

“I don’t want to spend ten years practicing!” she exclaimed, stuffing *another* pastry into her mouth.

Fine! Eat them all! Gain weight! See if I care!

“Oh,” Brie began, “I’ve been telling people about the princess classes I took, by the way.”

“Hm?”

What was she talking about?

Brie grinned at me. “Within high society, I mean,” she explained. “I’ve been telling people exactly what it’s like, how strict it is, and all that.”

“Why?”

“To improve your reputation, duh.”

“My what?” I asked, confused.

Brie puffed up her chest. “The prince told me I could speak freely about it. He encouraged me to, actually. I think that’s *precisely* why he wanted me to go through it. Thanks to that, now everyone sees you as a laudable young lady who’s endured ten years of an awfully strict education. Good for you!”

“What *part* of that is good for me?!”

Nobody asked you to do this!

“This way, hardly anyone will object to you becoming a princess. Well, you *were* serious about it, so hardly anyone opposes it as is, but you know.

And your social status isn’t an issue. Surely the streets will be abuzz with talk about this love story between a beautiful noble lady and the crown prince!”

“Well, stop!”

“Too bad. The word’s already spreading.” Brie grinned widely at me. I wanted to *kill* her! She wasn’t *helping* me! I didn’t *want* to get married! “And *you* should just accept your fate.”

“No!”

“You’re not a child. Don’t throw tantrums.”

“That’s not the *point*!” I protested, annoyed. “I’ve hardly had any free time since I was seven! When I think back on my old, happy life, all I want is to get it back! How could I not?”

For ten years I’d pictured the day I’d finally be free. I couldn’t just give up that easily!

All the fun games were prohibited. I had no time to play with friends. Day after day after day I took classes at the palace, got yelled at for making mistakes, and got yelled at for crying about being yelled at. The only light at the end of the tunnel was the hope I’d be free again one day.

Yep. That was the *one* thing.

“I spent all that time thinking someday my engagement would be called off and I’d be free. And you want me to just marry? What about my *feelings*?” I asked, pouting.

“You know,” Brie said, picking up another pastry. “You’re *really* pouty.”

“Don’t call me that!”

***

Our conversation during the day had left me rattled.

I shook my head, reminding myself I couldn’t afford to feel that way.

The sun had completely set, and Maria wasn’t in the room with me anymore. I was all alone tonight. No one could interfere.

There was only one thing to do.

“All right! Time to look for the hidden door!”

I more or less knew where this room was within the palace. There was no reason I wouldn’t, since I hadn’t been brought here in a blindfold or anything like that. And I had a pretty good grasp of the palace’s layout. Sadly, some places were secret and restricted to the royal family, so my knowledge wasn’t perfect. Speaking of which, this was a secret room, and thus not labeled on the palace map. It was passed off as a storeroom.

But! The next room over was a whole other story. The room next to this one was clearly marked on the map and, if the map was correct, there should be a door connecting the neighboring room to this one. Back when I first saw this, I wondered why there would be a door leading into a warehouse. Now I knew.

In other words, if there was a door you could use from the other side, there had to be a door you could use from this side too.

“Hee hee! They’ve underestimated me!”

Keeping me in the room next to that other one was like asking me to escape!

Now then, little door. Come out, come out, wherever you are.

I wandered the room and looked around everywhere, but couldn’t find anything. Which made sense. It *was* a hidden door.

I decided to examine the floor, so I got on my hands and knees and crawled around.

“Ooh!”

There was a small trapdoor on the floor!

It was a little heavy, but with a bit of *oomph*, I managed to pull it open.

“Oh,” I murmured, disappointed. “It’s just a storage space.”

Why would anyone put such a convenient thing in a room for imprisoning people?!

Frustrated, I closed the trapdoor.

“Next...”

I looked around again for anything suspicious.

“This bookshelf, maybe,” I pondered, moving toward it. The wall behind a bookshelf would’ve been the perfect place for a hidden door. It’d have been the first place anyone would have suspected.

And the books on the shelf were also very suspicious indeed.

“All romance novels, huh?”

That *had* to have been the prince’s doing. I didn’t have any interest in romance novels. What was he trying to do, tell me to study them? Was that how he wanted me to take an interest in love stories? I couldn’t figure out what he meant by it, and that annoyed me. I’d never read any of these books, and I had no intention of ever doing so.

Either way, I wanted to try and move the bookshelf, but it didn’t budge. Okay.

“There must be some sort of mechanism,” I figured.

I searched the bookshelf for some sort of trigger. As I thought, every last book’s title suggested a romance. This gave me a bad feeling, but I still needed to investigate. One by one, I checked the titles.

“Hm?”

There was only one book different from the others. Inadvertently, I read the title aloud.

“Prince Clarke’s Diary.”

Oh. Oh no. Not touching that, I thought, meaning to skip it, but I couldn’t help looking at it.

Maybe a little peek? A tiny one?

Thinking maybe I could find some sort of leverage on him, I took the book.

There was a clicking sound.

“Huh?” I exclaimed involuntarily.

The bookshelf slid to the side in an instant, revealing the neighboring room.

Oh, that’s such a cool mechanism!

A bit impressed, I flung the book I was holding into the next room over, and with my heart leaping in my chest, I barged right in.

“Yesss!” I exclaimed, feeling like the hero in a tale of adventure.

How exciting! I’d found a hidden door! Way to go, me!

In high spirits, I quickly looked to the door to make my escape—only to freeze in my tracks.

“L-Lord Clarke?”

He stood in front of the door, a smile plastered on his face.

“Hello, Lettie,” he said, taking a few steps towards me. “It took you long enough.”

Every time he stepped forward, I stepped back.

“That wasn’t very nice of you, throwing my diary away like that,” he said, picking up the discarded book as he crossed the room.

“Wh-Why are you here?” I stammered.

“I knew you’d use this hidden door, of course. Isn’t that obvious?”

Eeeeeek! Yikes! Nope!

The closer he got, the more creeped out I felt.

“My beautiful Leticia, coming to me of her own accord. Isn’t that grand? That’s why I moved to this room.”

Examining the room, I could indeed see a bed and a table.

And then, with a thud, my back was to the wall.

Having cornered me, Lord Clarke plucked a book from the shelf on this side. It quietly slid shut.

No! My escape route!

I, Duchess Leticia, was in my most dire situation yet!

***

My back was to the wall. Lord Clarke had cornered me. The color had drained from my face.

“Now, Lettie, this will be a long night,” he whispered in my ear.

Warning bells clanged in my head as his handsome face stared right at me.

Too close! Too close! Way too close!

Instinctively, I tried to protect my face with my hand, but Lord Clarke promptly caught it.

Hey! Don't stroke my hand while looking at me like that!

"You truly are beautiful, Lettie," he remarked dreamily, making heat rise to my cheeks. "And you're adorable when you blush."

He was always saying that, again and again. And it was just as embarrassing, every time!

Now I was even more flustered.

"Hngh..." As he gleefully looked at me, all I could do was groan. Honestly? I had no tolerance for romance.

Lord Clarke and I had been engaged since before I'd been able to comprehend love and affection. Naturally, I'd been kept away from the opposite sex to avoid any impropriety. Which meant I was totally out of my element in this rosy atmosphere.

On top of having zero experience with love, I'd had zero contact with men I wasn't related to. This kind of advance was a little much for me.

I was on the verge of tears.

"Have mercy on me..." I murmured, my voice so faint even I was surprised. I hadn't known I was capable of making such a sad little sound.

Lord Clarke gave me a head pat. I wished he hadn't!

"Leticia," he said softly, with a smile. "Shall we?"

Before I could ask what he meant, he'd already scooped me up in his arms.

"Nooo! Put me down!"

"I will soon," he said, turning to the bed.

“Nooo! Don’t put me down!”

“Oh, Lettie. You change your mind so easily!”

I mean, yes! Why wouldn’t I change my mind?! Every red flag was going off at the same time! I wanted to heed them! Desperately!

But my protests fell on deaf ears, and Lord Clarke gently set me down on the bed.

“Lettie, Lettie,” he murmured, in a voice so warm I could have melted. “My sweet Lettie...”

And then he leaned over me on the bed, inching ever closer.

No, no, no, this is bad! Bad!

“W-We can’t do this kind of thing before marriage!” I managed to protest, my throat straining to get the words out.

“Right,” he said with a blank expression, and then his expression changed, like he’d realized something. “Relax. I won’t do anything before marriage.”

“Huh?”

“My dream is for us to be joined only after we marry and are officially husband and wife,” he said.

Oh. That’s his dream?

Feeling like I’d avoided the worst, I let out a breath I’d been holding. When I sighed, Lord Clarke scooped up a lock of my hair.

“I’ll even refrain from kissing you on the lips until the ceremony,” he said.

And that’s also part of his dream?

I meant to tell him that I thought this was a very feminine dream, but the words died in my throat when he brought my hair to his lips and kissed it. I was a blushing, flustered mess, and I was *positive* I looked ridiculous.

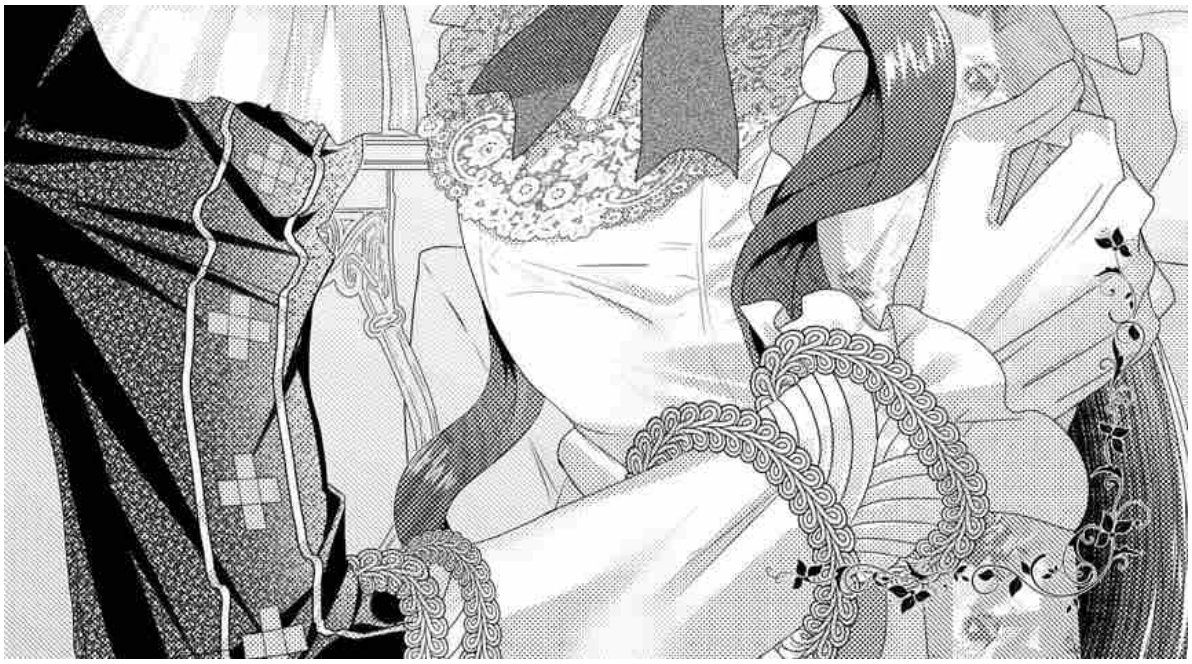
Lord Clarke, however, didn't seem to mind.

"But I *will* kiss you elsewhere," he said, leaning closer to my face.

There was a soft smooching sound, and then he pulled away.

"M-M-My cheek..." I stammered, panicking, holding the cheek he'd just kissed.

He looked very pleased with himself.



“Being affectionate like this is also part of my dream.”

Stop trying to make it come true!

***

I ended up spending the whole night with him.

The next day, I was back in my own room, dumbfounded.

Lord Clarke had gone to work, or something. He sounded like a very busy man. I wished he’d stop fussing over me, if he was so busy.

Last night had been the worst. He’d showered my face with kisses all over, whispered sweet nothings, petted my body. I’d thought my head was going to explode.

You can guess what happened to me, I’m sure.

I fainted.

I’d been in full overheat mode. My mind had given out.

And, to my utter chagrin, I'd ended up falling asleep like that with Lord Clarke.

To make this clear: the prince did not lay a hand on me, just as he'd promised. Thanks to that, I'd been able to sleep like a log until morning.

And then, come morning, since he was busy, he whispered some more sweet words to me, and left.

Thankfully, no one seemed to know that I'd fallen asleep beside Lord Clarke last night, so I was able to simply return to my own room.

I let out a sigh, feeling exhausted despite having slept soundly.

Rising from the chair where I sat, I tried to move the table.

"Hnnnngh!"

It was surprisingly heavy!

"What are you doing, madam?" asked a perplexed Maria, having walked into the room pushing a cart loaded with breakfast.

Which reminded me I was hungry.

"Maria, can you give me a hand?" I pleaded.

"What do you need to move the table for, madam?" she asked, tilting her head to the side. All of her mannerisms were so cute!

"So this hidden door can't be used," I explained.

"There's a hidden door?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I knew it! So the palace *does* have those!"

"Yes, yes it does," I said. "But that's not the point right now."

"If you take out a book, the door moves, right? Classic!" Excited, Maria pulled out Lord Clarke's diary. The door slid open. Her eyes were shining.

“It opened!”

“Wow, you figured it out so quickly,” I remarked.

“It was obvious!”

Well, if Maria had been able to tell at a glance, it really *had* been a trap. How sad that I’d fallen for it so easily.

Leaving me wallowing in my despair, Maria peeked at the next room over.

“It looks like someone’s bedchambers,” she pointed out.

“Yes, the prince’s,” I said.

“Wow!” she exclaimed, her eyes wide with amazement. “He’s been next door all along?!”

“Well, I’m not sure *when* he moved there, exactly, but he was indeed there last night.”

With a drawn-out sound of awe, Maria pushed the book back into place, and the door slid shut.

“Wow, the prince’s love truly is remarkable,” she said.

“Don’t say that!”

“So, did His Highness come into this room? Or did you go over?”

“Don’t ask me that!” I protested, covering my ears and shaking my head.

Maria seemed unable to contain her curiosity, however.

“Ugh, enough already!” I said, exasperated. “Just serve breakfast!”

Reluctantly, Maria complied, and went about setting the table. She was so faithful to her duties!

“So, why were you trying to move the table?” she asked.

“Well, I figured I would use it to block the door,” I answered honestly, to Maria’s disappointment.

“This room actually has a *hidden door*, and you want to block it, madam? What a waste! I think it’s best to leave it as is.”

“Are you having fun at my expense?”

“Us servants really enjoy hearing all about the love affairs of nobility and royalty.”

“I don’t care about any of that!”

“Please make it a wonderful love story, madam!”

“Absolutely not!”

“Start by telling me what happened last night!”

“I will *not*!”

“You’re cruel, madam!” Maria protested, puffing her cheeks.

Yes, she was cute, but I wasn’t going to tell her anything! If I did, she’d blab to all her coworkers! Also, I was no madam!

“Fine!” I yelled. “I’ll just move it myself!”

I made another effort to get the table to budge. It moved a few millimeters at a time at best. My arms were trembling.

“You know, madam...” Maria spoke up once she’d finished putting away the dishes. “You spend so much time monkeying around, but at times like this, you’re more like a little mouse.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

***

In the end, after a whole day of painstakingly moving that table—and no thanks to Maria—I managed to get it to block the way to the hidden door. Also, since it'd have been inconvenient to not have a table available, I had another, another, smaller one set up.

Rubbing my sore muscles, I snickered. "Heh heh! Try opening this door *now*, Lord Clarke!"

I felt a sense of accomplishment. I'd always been one step behind him. Just once, I'd wanted to come out on top. I was so sure he'd be shocked he couldn't open this door anymore! Just thinking about it had me excited.

Even if the price to pay was these horrible muscle aches. I wanted to yell at people to stop making tables out of marble. They were way too heavy!

As I enjoyed the tea Maria had brewed for me just before leaving, the bookshelf began to rattle.

Ha! There it is!

Delighted, I approached the shelf. In spite of all the violent shaking, the table stood firmly in the way. All the bookshelf could do was rattle loudly until, finally, it stopped moving.

Lord Clarke must've stopped trying to get it to slide open.

A chuckle escaped my lips. "Finally! A win for Leticia!"

Oh, he must've been so vexed! I finally got to pay him back for all his relentless teasing. For once, he was getting a taste of his own medicine!

Satisfied, I returned to my chair. And then the door to the room made a clicking sound.

Huh?

Startled, I hesitantly looked to the source of the sound. The door slowly opened.

And there stood Lord Clarke, all smiles.

Surely you understand the fear I felt at that moment. He was *clearly* displeased. Nothing like his usual self.

“Lettie,” he said in a low voice.

“Y-Yes?” I stammered.

Yikes!

As I sat, trembling on my chair, he approached me. The main door was behind him. The hidden door was sealed shut. I was cornered.

Before I had the chance to look for another way out, Lord Clarke stood in front of me, leaning down to meet my gaze.

“Care to explain *that*, Lettie?” he asked, gesturing at the door I’d blocked.

“It’s a hidden door,” I answered.

“*Lettie*.”

Look, I knew he wasn’t asking *what* that was. He wanted to know *why* it wasn’t opening.

I opened my mouth to speak, trying to maintain my composure. “Well, I made it so it wouldn’t open...”

“Why?”

So you can’t come in here! was what I wanted to say, but was too frightened.

Why was he so mad over a little prank?

I lamented my carelessness. I’d thought that if I sealed off the hidden door, Lord Clarke wouldn’t have been able to come in...but of course he

could just open the regular door. Rookie mistake.

“I, I mean, because, you know, I didn’t really want you to come over, and stuff...”

“Why?”

“Why, you ask?” I mumbled, fidgeting as I looked down.

“Lettie?”

Because your face is always all up in my *face!*

Heat rose rapidly to my cheeks. Having his face so close to mine all the time that I could feel his breath on my skin? Bad for my heart. Very bad.

“Well...” I trailed off.

“Well?” the prince echoed.

“You’d just do embarrassing things to me, and I don’t want that!” I exclaimed with conviction.

Lord Clarke stared blankly at me for a moment before chuckling.

See, *that* was why I didn’t want to tell him!

That sullenness from moments ago was gone. The prince cupped my cheeks in his hands.

Hey! Don’t fixate on my face!

“Really? So this is embarrassing to you, Lettie?” he asked, planting a kiss on my cheek.

“Eeeeeep!” I squeaked, clutching my cheek. I tried to back away, but I lost my balance, since, you know. I was sitting on a chair. In my panic, I was about to fall off my seat when Lord Clarke quickly caught me in his arms.

My heart was leaping out of my chest.

“Eek!” I yelped, having lost the ability to do anything but make dumb noises.

Lord Clarke nuzzled my cheek with his.

“My goodness, Lettie, you’re so cute.”

Don’t call my dumb noises cute!

I wanted to tell him he was wrong, but his embrace was so tight, I couldn’t do it. He kept nuzzling me for a while until, satisfied, he pulled away. Phew!

“You’re so easy to fluster, you know,” he said.

Stop talking like that!

“You were so embarrassed about yesterday that you tried to stop me from coming over today. How adorable!” he cooed, petting my cheek with a dreamy look on his face.

I said stop! If you keep talking like that my face’s going to get so hot my ears will melt off!

I tried to cover my ears with my hands, but he quickly moved them away.

“Don’t worry, my sweet Leticia. I’ll keep telling you all about how much I love you until you’re sick of hearing it.”

“No thank you!” I snapped sharply, but he just smiled happily at me.

“But Lettie...” he began, his voice suddenly lowering, causing me to shiver. He pointed at the hidden door, then continued, “If you do something like *that* again, I don’t know that I’ll be able to be gentle with you.”

Eep!

He may have been smiling with his lips, but his eyes told a different story. Once again, I shivered in fear.

“This won’t happen again, will it?” he asked, looking me straight in the eyes.

All I could do was nod in agreement.

***

I hadn’t been able to keep the hidden door blocked in the end.

And I didn’t even get the chance to grieve that fact, as Lord Clarke had just kept whispering sweet nothings in my ear.

He’d moved the table away from the bookshelf, murmured this and that, and left. Wow. What a selfish jerk.

“Right, brother?” I asked.

“You called me here to tell me *this*?” my brother, Nadir, asked indignantly.

Incidentally, although I couldn’t go outside, I could invite guests over to talk. Like my brother, who I’d asked to come over.

“No, it’s about something else...” I trailed off, hesitating.

“What is it?” He looked at me with annoyance.

That’s no attitude to have toward your sister!

I composed myself and said, “Lord Clarke keeps *touching* me.”

My brother stared blankly at me. “Huh?”

“I said, Lord Clarke keeps *touching* me,” I repeated.

“Yes, I got that the first time,” he snapped, stopping me from saying it again. “You’re engaged, so that doesn’t strike me as anything worth fussing over.”

“I don’t know how to deal with guys, okay?! It’s killing me!”

“Killing you,” my brother echoed.

“I’m just saying I want to build some tolerance!”

“Build what now?” my brother asked, exasperated.

“I think Lord Clarke is having fun with the fact my tolerance is so low! So maybe if I get used to guys and stop reacting, he’ll calm down!”

“I don’t think that’s going to calm him down.”

“But brother...!”

“Listen when people are speaking.”

“Help me!” I pleaded, clasping my brother’s hand.

He looked at me.

I looked at him.

“Leticia.”

“Yes, brother?”

“What are you doing?” he asked, staring at me.

“You’re a guy. I’m trying to build a tolerance for touching guys. So I’m touching you.”

“And what are your thoughts?”

“I don’t feel anything at all.”

“Of course you don’t!” he yelled, pulling his hand away from mine. “I may be male, but I’m your brother. Why would I make you feel anything?”

“This is true...”

He *had* a point.

“So I’ll try it with someone else, then,” I said.

“Don’t.”

“But I need to build—”

“I said *don’t*,” he insisted, giving me a serious look. “Don’t do anything stupid. Just speak with him.”

“I did, but he didn’t listen!” I protested.

“You need to do more than just tell him about it,” he said, beckoning me over.

He whispered a plan into my ear. I looked at him quizzically.

“You really think that’ll work?” I asked.

“It will,” he guaranteed, nodding. “Make no mistake.”

I wasn’t sure what would come of that, but my brother seemed adamant.

Either way, I couldn’t think of anything else, so I figured I may as well try his idea. Inodded.

***

Lord Clarke sauntered into my room through the hidden door.

“Lord Clarke,” I called out.

Hearing me say his name, he happily started walking toward me.

“Please stay where you are,” I said, and he stopped on his tracks.

“Lettie?” he replied, confused.

I put on as angry of a face as I could muster.

“You touch me too much, Lord Clarke,” I said flatly.

Lord Clarke looked at me in shock, saying, “But we’re engaged. That’s only natural.”

“It’s not natural to *me*!” I protested emphatically.

The prince’s face visibly fell. “But I love you, Lettie. I want to touch you.”

“No.”

“Lettie...” he whined, looking like a kicked puppy. But that wasn’t going to work on me. I was *mad*!

“If you touch me any further, I will no longer call you by your name! Not ever again!” I threatened.

Lord Clarke’s breath caught in his throat, and he staggered.

“N-Never again?” he stammered.

“*Never* again,” I confirmed.

“Well, I don’t want that...”

“Then you’re prohibited from continuing to touch me.”

He looked at me like he wanted to say something.

“*No*,” I said emphatically.

“Very well...” he relented.

I let out a sigh of relief. I'd gotten through to him!

"A-Also, tell me in advance before you come to this room," I demanded.

"Very well..." he repeated, still obviously dejected. But that didn't matter. All he'd done so far was punish me!

"Thank you, brother," I whispered.

See, what Nadir had suggested earlier was: "Tell him you'll stop calling him by his name. He'll definitely cave. Be confident, and a little harsh too. If you don't make it clear that you mean what you're saying, it won't work."

Oh, my dear brother, you're not older than me for nothing! I'd always thought you were a useless pest, but now I saw I'd been mistaken.

For the first time in my life, I was grateful to him.

***

Since then, the prince had stopped touching me. I could be comfortable at last. I was relieved, truly.

But things were never so simple, were they?

"You're very cute today too, Lettie," Lord Clarke said with a flirtatious smile, as he sipped his tea.

Indeed. I'd made a mistake. I should've told him to stop flirting with me too. *And* I should've told him to not come to this room at all anymore.

Regret gripped my heart.

I thought about saying the magic words again, of course, but it was clear that they'd lose their effectiveness if I overused them.

A mistake. Yes. There was no other word for it.

“Leticia, won’t you let me hear your beautiful voice?”

“I would like to be silent,” I told him.

“But can you?” he asked, smiling broadly.

I sighed at him. Which was very disrespectful, mind you, but he didn’t seem bothered.

“Leticia, you’re very hardworking,” he said, trying very hard to flirt with me. “I’ve always seen that in you.”

“I see,” I replied flatly, deflecting his advances.

Maria fidgeted behind us. She was a huge fan of love stories, so she must’ve been very interested in my exchange with Lord Clarke.

The prince continued to grin at me, telling me all the things about me he liked, and I sighed yet again.

***

“So, what do you think I should do?”

“Beats me,” my good friend Brie replied, sounding utterly disinterested as she sipped her tea. “Hurry up and get with him, or hurry up and get the hell away.”

“You can’t even be bothered to give me proper advice,” I complained.

“I’m betting on you getting with him, for the record.”

“Don’t gamble on other people’s business!” I snapped huffily.

Brie was unfazed, calmly reaching for the tea cakes. Maria poured her another cup of tea with a warm smile.

“I bet on them getting together too!” the handmaiden said.

“Hey! No gambling! That’s a bad habit!” I protested. Maria just smiled broadly at me.

What manner of terrible vices were being taught to this innocent girl?! I glared at Brie, who sipped her tea and pretended not to notice.

“I don’t care one lick about your troubles,” Brie said coldly. “I’m much more interested in a method to win your brother over.”

“Use your squish powers,” I suggested.

“*You’re* the one who doesn’t want to give proper advice, I see,” Brie retorted. Um, rude? She was the one who wasn’t interested first! “But, you know, I do think telling the prince not to flirt with you is futile.”

“How come?” I asked, turning my gaze to her.

Stuffing another tea cake into her mouth and idly munching on it, Brie replied, “How would he make you fall for him if he didn’t flirt?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” I answer flatly.

“And if you tell him not to do it, won’t that just push him over the edge and make him force himself upon you?”

“I should hope not!” I exclaimed, horrified.

“Then at least let him get some of it out of his system,” she said.

Hesitantly, I nodded at her words, but...

“I don’t want to admit *you* of all people are right, though.”

“Are you picking a fight?” she demanded.

“More tea, please, Maria,” I asked the handmaiden.

“Hey! Listen to me!” Brie protested.

I decided to use my busty visitor to get my pent-out stress out of *my* system.

Yes, that's what I'll do, I resolved, taking a sip of the tea Maria had brewed.

***

By the way, I hadn't given up on escaping yet. No, I had in fact thought of another method to get away.

"One, two, three!"

Psyching myself up, I swung.

In my hand was a fireplace poker. I'd wanted a hammer, really, but sadly I couldn't really get one of those here.

"One, two, three!" I cried again, as I struck at the wall.

See, I'd noticed signs of repairs on a portion of the wall in the corner of the attached dressing room. Those spots are usually fragile. And just as I predicted, bit by bit, I managed to dig a hole into that area.

It took a while. I'd been working on this hole for three days. At this point, it was pretty big.

I hit the wall hard, giving it all I had. This was my final strike.

Discarding the fireplace poker, I squeezed through the hole.

Heh heh! Once I get through here, I'm free at last!

"Hm?" A sound escaped my throat when I was halfway through the hole.

I was stuck.

The color drained from my face.

Despite straining as hard as I could to push forward, I couldn’t move.

I tried going back. No dice.

Oh no. *Oh no.*

Whatever color was still left on my face vanished.

Was the hole too small? I’d torn down the whole area that had been repaired, though, so I couldn’t make it any bigger. Where had I gone wrong?

Oh.

Frustrated, I bit my lip.

I’d gained weight.

Right. I’d been locked up in this room, not getting much exercise, but I did eat three solid meals every day, and even snacked in between. I’d gained weight. I’d gained weight for sure.

Before, I would’ve been able to fit through without an issue, but now...

Now I was stuck here with no way out.

That was it. I had no clue what would happen if anyone found me like this—no, I *didn’t* want anyone to find me like this, looking like an idiot.

Sad, frustrated, and embarrassed at this hopeless situation of my own making, I began to cry.

As I sobbed, someone called out to me from behind.

“Leticia.” The voice was somewhere between an angel’s song and a devil’s whisper.

“Lord Clarke...” I responded, still in tears. My head was poking out of the hole, however, so I couldn’t see him.

“How did you...” he trailed off, sounding perplexed.

Yes, yes, of *course* he’d want to know.

“I thought I could make it,” I said, frustrated.

“Maybe I can pull you out,” he suggested, confused but trying to help.

“Maybe.”

I’d been able to get partway out head first, so surely if he pulled me from behind he could get me out, right?

“On three, then,” he said, gripping my legs. “One, two...three!”

And he pulled.

“Ow! Ow ow ow!” I yelped.

“You’ll need to hang in there,” he said.

“No! My legs hurt!”

It wasn’t the part of me that was stuck that hurt—my legs did.

“S-Sorry,” he stammered, letting go of my legs.

“Maybe try grabbing my hips?” I suggested.

“What?” he asked, bewildered that I had suggested that at all. “But...if I do that, I’ll inevitably touch your lovely posterior, too.”

“Stop being weird about it! Don’t call it lovely! And this is an emergency, so you have my permission!

“You’re not going to stop calling me by my name if I touch it, then?”

“No!”

That was what he was worried about?!

“Then...”

Lord Clarke put his hands on my hips, sounding nervous.

“One, two...three!”

He yanked with all his might. Ow!

“Hang in there, Leticia,” he said. “You moved a little!”

“That’s good, I guess...”

“Okay, one more time. One, two...three!”

He pulled. I groaned in pain. Rinse, repeat...and I slowly made it back to the room.

“One, two...*three*!”

Finally, with one last tug, I popped out of the hole. The first thing I saw was Lord Clarke, standing there, sweaty and disheveled. I could feel my tears welling up again.

“Lettie.”

“Lord Clarke.”

I was sure I looked horrendous, but I couldn’t care less at that moment. For the first time, I pulled the prince into a hug.

“You did it!” I exclaimed.

“I did!” he exclaimed back, returning my hug.

We stood there, holding each other tightly, sharing a weird sense of accomplishment.

***

After that, Lord Clarke had said he would get the wall reinforced. Which, of course, made sense, and I'd agreed to it.

It amused us both to see one another in such a disheveled state. Lord Clarke arranged for a bath, and once we were both refreshed, we excitedly said "See you tomorrow, then!" "See you!" to one another, and went to sleep in our respective beds.

And then morning came.

And now I was so embarrassed I wanted to die.

Really, yesterday me? "See you"? What were you *thinking*?

I'd been stuck in a hole, in a ridiculous state. My image as a lady was ruined. Ruined!

Granted, I *had* shown him all sorts of unladylike behavior already, climbing trees and whatnot. One would think I'd have been over it by now, but no. Hell, I'd even hoped before that maybe seeing me like that would kill any feelings he had for me, but this time I was deflated. After seeing me like *that*, it would've made perfect sense for Lord Clarke to lose all interest in me. It would've been for the best, really.

And I felt anything but happy about it.

Strange, right? Sure, it had been embarrassing, but I shouldn't have minded it. So why..?

I tilted my head, confused, but shook it off quickly.

Given I'd said I'd see him tomorrow, and that had been yesterday, I was sure he'd be coming today. The one day I wished he'd leave me alone most of all, and he'd definitely come.

I agonized in bed, wondering what to do, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me whole.

And then it hit me.

The floor *did* open up!

I sprung to my feet, and changed from my pajamas to my day clothes. Then I headed straight for the trapdoor. I pried it open, and hurriedly crawled into the storage space beneath the floorboards that I'd found the other day.

At the time, I'd wondered why this had even been built here, but now I was glad it was so well-made.

Ah, how calming it was.

I sat, clutching my knees to my chest. This empty space was much more comforting than I'd anticipated, and before I knew it, I drifted off to the world of dreams.

And next thing I knew, Maria's scream snapped me awake.

"The, the, the, the madam is gooooooone!!!"

Her screams were always so resonant!

Next, I heard the sounds of scrambling as Maria hurriedly ran outside.

"Have you seen the madam?!" she asked someone. Probably a guard at the door.

"I haven't."

"Madaaam!" she screamed again.

Maria's voice echoed impressively, and in no time at all, every last person was aware I was missing. A castle-wide search began immediately, and everyone and their little dog was shouting "Madam!" all over the place. It triggered my anxiety.

There was no way I could leave now.

I mean, what would've happened if I did? People would've just looked at me like, "Really?" and asked what I was doing in there. And I couldn't exactly give them a childish reason like "I was just embarrassed," so...

My only intention had been to avoid Lord Clarke. Again, I'd miscalculated. Well, no, I'd just acted without thinking, really.

"Lettie?" As I fretted over what to do, the prince's voice rang out above me. "Leticia, you're in here, aren't you?"

The search party seemed to have neglected to check this room; they must have been looking elsewhere.

"Lettie," he said. "I'm the only one here right now, so come out while you can."

Well, if he was the only one there, there was no one else to discover what an idiot I was for crawling into this storage space under the floor, right? Still, considering yesterday's events, I was hesitant to come out. As I was busy being indecisive, I heard the sounds of footsteps shuffling closer.

"Are you in here?" Lord Clarke asked, pulling the trapdoor open.

My eyes strained to adjust to the sudden brightness, having spent a while in the dark.

"Lettie," he murmured, breathing a sigh of relief. He slid his hands under my arms and helped me out, then closed the trapdoor. "What were you doing in there?"

Yes, yes, of *course* he'd want to know.

"I just wanted to be alone for a little while," I answered dejectedly.

"Why?" the prince asked, tilting his head, puzzled.

Please don't ask me that, I silently pleaded with my eyes, to no avail. Lord Clarke just waited for me to speak up. Defeated, I opened my mouth to speak.

“I was embarrassed...”

“Pardon?” he asked, tilting his head again.

You heard me!

“I felt awkward about seeing you!” I blurted out, frustrated.

“Does...” the prince began, seeming taken aback, “Does that mean you hate me now?”

“Of course not!”

Why would he think that?!

As my cheeks burned red, I continued, “It’s just... Y-You saw an embarrassing side of me yesterday, so I felt awkward about seeing you again!”

At my words, Lord Clarke let out a relieved sigh. “It’s okay, Lettie. I love you no matter what.”

“That’s not the problem...” I muttered, covering my flushed face in embarrassment.

If I’d known I’d need to say these things, I would’ve just stayed put and met with him like a normal person.

“Anyway, thank you for yesterday!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, you’re quite welcome,” he replied, smiling at my words of gratitude.

“And please don’t tell anyone about what happened,” I begged.

“Of course. I won’t. Only I get to know about that adorable side of you, Lettie.”

“You really don’t need to be weird about it! Just promise you won’t tell *anyone*,” I repeated emphatically.

“I promise,” he said, nodding.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, he smiled sweetly at me. I wished he wouldn’t!

I was feeling vulnerable, okay? Him flashing his handsome smile at me at a time like that was too much!

Avoiding his gaze, I spotted Maria by the door.

“Oh! Madam! There you are!” she exclaimed, running into the room. She looked quite angry at me, and admonished me loudly. “If you want to disappear to be lovey-dovey with the prince, at least let me know, please!”

“That’s not what happened!” I protested.

“Lovey-dovey,” the prince echoed dreamily.

Meanwhile, the guard who had followed Maria into the room had a face like, “Really, though?”

No! Not really! Not at all, actually!

“I said that’s not what happened!” I insisted.

Nobody believed me.

***

I trudged down the hallway.

Yes! I was walking down the hallway! How exciting!

Except this wasn’t because I’d managed to break free. I was surrounded by guards as I walked. A precaution against escaping, I was told. A little *too* strict, if you ask me.

To an onlooker, I would've looked like a noble lady surrounded by a bunch of old guards. Very stuffy. Well, no, they were all so much taller than me that people probably couldn't really see me among them. In which case, they'd just look like a bunch of old guards walking around in a circle formation. Even stuffier.

Mentally whining about how stuffy it all was, I arrived at a particular room in the castle—one I was quite familiar with. The soldiers fell back, blocking my retreat. The only option left was to open the door in front of me. How thorough. Ugh.

Sighing, I opened the door.

Inside, a smiling face was waiting for me.

"Oh, Lettie, dear! It's been so long!"

I shut the door.

"Lettie? Dear? Oh my! Are you being shy, now?" the woman on the other side of the door asked in a drawn-out voice.

Turning around, I saw the guards giving me sympathetic looks.

Well, okay, then.

Mustering my courage, I opened the door again.

"Your Majesty," I began, "it is an honor to—"

"Oh, shush with the formalities," the queen—Lord Clarke's mother—cut in, beckoning me to the table. I approached as instructed and took the vacant seat.

She chuckled. "Oh, little Lettie, you haven't changed at all!"

The queen had a habit of speaking in a languid manner. In diplomatic situations, however, she spoke quite briskly. She was the kind of woman who kept her private and work lives fully separate.

“Um, may I help you with anything?” I asked.

“Oh, no, no,” she replied, smiling broadly. “I just wanted to have a little chat with my dear daughter-in-law.”

The way she tilted her head was so adorable that it was hard to believe she had a fully grown son.

“I see,” I said simply, sipping the tea the handmaiden at my side had poured.

Honestly, I wasn’t good at dealing with her.

I didn’t *hate* her. I just found her *difficult*. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking, and so I never knew how to act around her.

“Aw, little Lettie, there’s no need to be so timid,” she chirped.

And I also couldn’t deal with the fact she always saw right through me. *How* did she always know what I was thinking?

This side of her was so much like Lord Clarke... They were indeed mother and son.

“I love you, Lettie, dear. You’re so cute. Say, why don’t you become my daughter-in-law sooner, rather than later?”

“No, thank you,” I replied flatly.

“Oh my! Such a blunt rejection!” she exclaimed with a smile, sipping her tea.Truly, she was the queen. Her mannerisms were so graceful. “But I really *do* love you, my little Lettie. I would very much prefer to have you as Clarke’s partner over anyone else, hmm?”

“No thank you,” I repeated.

“Oh, my heart!” she lamented, pouting. Even that suited her. “But you’ve performed so splendidly during your princess classes, dear! You’re simply the perfect match for him.”

“I just don’t want to impact my house’s reputation,” I explained.

“You wouldn’t be able to do it if you weren’t diligent at heart,” the queen pointed out. She was probably paying me a true compliment, I thought, but I still couldn’t simply accept it. It wasn’t like I took any joy in what I had to do, after all. “You’re quite obstinate, aren’t you, dear? That’s good, that’s good.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, but that wasn’t a compliment!” she exclaimed, chuckling. “Say, dear?”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“How do you feel about Clarke?”

“He’s persistent.”

“My, how straightforward!” the queen remarked. She seemed to be enjoying this. “Well then, what of his looks?”

“Pardon?”

“His looks, dear. What do you think of his face?”

I briefly pondered whether or not to answer honestly, and then I decided that honesty was my only option. She’d be able to smell a lie a mile away.

“His features are beautiful,” I answered truthfully.

“So he *is* your type,” she replied.

That wasn’t what I’d said.

“What of his voice?” she continued.

“He has a good voice.”

“So you think that’s attractive, too,” she concluded.

Could she *please* stop talking like that?

“Then,” she continued, still questioning me despite my growing irritation, “what of his overbearing personality?”

“I hate it,” I answered without missing a beat.

“Hmm, I see, I see.”

What are you trying to say?!

I wished she’d stop grinning at me like that, but no. She had no intention of stopping whatsoever.

“Well, I think I have a rough idea now,” she said, taking a bite of cake. “Clarke is your first love, isn’t he?”

She looked like she was greatly enjoying her cake. My jaw dropped.

“What...?”

The queen’s words echoed in my mind.

First love. First love. First love. First love. First love.

First love?!

I sat there, dumbfounded, my mouth agape, as the queen watched me with amusement.

“Wh-What do you mean?” I stammered.

“Ah, so you don’t remember, do you, dear?” She let out a soft, elegant chuckle.

I was at a loss.

The handmaiden quietly refilled our teacups.

“I speak of when you first came here, after your engagement to Clarke,” she said, sipping the freshly poured tea. “You were only introduced to one another that day, so you had no awareness yet that you were set to be the future queen. You were quite excited, dear.”

Excited? Me?

I tried to recall the distant memory, but nothing came to mind at all.

“When you first met him, you made this adorable little face, and you excitedly asked, ‘Am I going to marry this handsome boy? Yaaay!’ It was truly quite cute,” the queen recalled, her gaze distant and nostalgic. “And after that, we let the two of you go for a stroll around the courtyard. We wanted to give the young ones a little alone time, yes?”

Thinking back on the memory of Lord Clarke and I happily spending time in the courtyard together, the queen grinned widely.

“You picked the flowers in the courtyard to try and make a flower crown, but you couldn’t quite do it, and you started crying. When Clarke saw that, he remade the crown and placed it on your head.”

The queen continued to reminisce, elated.

“And when he did, you stopped crying, dear. You blinked, smiled, stared at him, and then gave him a little kiss on the cheek. You said, ‘I love you, Lord Clarke!’ and jumped on him. Ah, how adorable that was. It was the first time I watched someone fall in love.”

“Th-That’s...” I stammered. I wanted to say that wasn’t true, but I lost my nerve and the words died in my throat.

“So you see,” the queen continued, beaming at me and my loss for words, “you can’t say Clarke isn’t your type at all, dear. Either way, I have a rough idea of what I wanted to know, so let’s end this conversation here,

shall we? This cake won’t eat itself, and it’s a special treat only sold at the capital of a neighboring nation.”

The queen offered me a slice of cake, which I gratefully accepted.

Honestly, though, I couldn’t even tell what it tasted like.

***

Once again I found myself surrounded by old guards as I walked through the palace.

I was overcome with some indescribable feelings as we passed by the courtyard, and asked the soldiers if we could stop there. They hesitated for a moment, but acquiesced.

There I sat, plucking and weaving flowers together. I wasn't very good at it, though. I'd never been very good at it, I realized.

I gave up, tossing aside the failed flower crown.

When I did, one of the soldiers sat down next to me. *Um, should you be sitting next to the prince's fiancée?* I thought. But as he began to craft a beautiful flower crown with his armored fingers, I couldn't help but stare. He was so good at it!

Once he finished it, he placed the crown on my head.

"It suits you, Lettie," he said quietly.

My heart skipped a beat. "L-Lord Clarke?!"

"Indeed," the prince replied casually, confirming his identity.

"Wh-Why are you disguised as a soldier?" I asked.

"Well, I figured you might be sick of me simply chasing after you, so I thought I'd add a little twist."

"Um, I don't particularly care either way, though."

"I see," he said, taking off his helmet. "It gets pretty stuffy wearing this, you know."

"I would imagine so..."

He looked so good, yet he was doing something so stupid.

“I made you a flower crown, once upon a time,” he said, a nostalgic smile playing upon his lips.

The queen had said something along those lines earlier, too.

“But then you started your princess education, and stopped smiling at me. I felt guilty, but I couldn’t let you go.” The prince scooted a little closer to me, his expression serious. “I’m sorry. Still, I love you.”

I felt my heart beating faster in my chest. “I...”

“You...?”

“I’m leaving!” I announced, standing up.

Despondent, Lord Clarke stood up as well. “Allow me to escort you, then,” he said, before turning to the guards. “The rest of you are dismissed.”

We walked back to my room, the soft clinking of his armor the only sound between us. I stole a glance at the prince, whose face was slightly damp with sweat—no doubt due to the stuffy helmet—and my heart skipped a beat.

Flustered, I shook my head. Lord Clarke seemed puzzled, but didn’t pry.

Once we arrived at my room, he opened the door for me.

“Lettie,” he called out, reaching for my cheek—but then he abruptly pulled away without touching me. He must’ve remembered I’d told him not to do that. “Sweet dreams,” he said, with a pained look on his face, and shut the door behind him.

“Madam, I’ll set the table for dinner,” Maria said cheerfully as she began to do just that, completely unaware of my complex feelings.

I took a seat.

“I...”

“You?” she asked as I stabbed my fork into my steak.

“I won’t be swayed by this!” I yelled.

Maria only tilted her head in response.

***

“Lady Leticia, I thank you for the invitation.”

“I should be the one thanking you, Count Davud,” I said, taking the portly middle-aged man’s hand. “You’ve traveled quite a distance to be here today.”

The royal family was hosting a party today. As Lord Clarke’s fiancée, I was used to entertaining guests of the royal family like this. But I wanted to tell them that I wasn’t married yet, so I wasn’t the one who’d invited them or anything.

I couldn’t say that, of course, so I just concealed my true feelings and smiled politely.

Next to me, Lord Clarke, too, gracefully entertained the aristocracy. I could feel all the gazes from young noble ladies on him. How popular he was!

Once we were done with the greetings, the prince and I moved to the seating area reserved for royalty. Telling them I wasn’t royalty wouldn’t have accomplished anything, after all.

By the way, this party was to formally celebrate my engagement to the prince. We’d had one when we were seven, of course, but we were only children back then. It had been a light celebration. Now that we were adults, a second one was being held to remind all of society that I was indeed his fiancée.

It was a pain. A huge pain.

I didn’t see the need for any of this—I’d been formally attending every party and ball up to this point anyway, and everyone already knew who I was. Apparently, however, this was *different*. Different how, exactly?

My brother was the one who’d suggested this party. He was trying to keep me from running away, the cunning scoundrel. Devil! Tyrant!

I gave him a resentful look, but he just grinned widely and carried on having the time of his life. Ugh! If we hadn’t been in public, I’d have actually glared at him! But I’d been educated as a proper princess, so I simply hid my displeasure and continued to smile politely at the guests.

How dare you hold me back, princess lessons! I thought, gritting my teeth internally as I kept my expression pleasant. I was an actress. A *perfect* actress.

Brie was nonchalantly busying herself with establishing her claim over my brother by standing at his side. That was very like her indeed.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” The king, a plump older man, addressed the crowd. “Thank you for making the long journey to come here. As you all know, today we celebrate once again the engagement of my son Clarke, and Duchess Leticia of House Dorman.”

If they all know, why do you need to remind them?

“Let us have a toast. To their engagement!” he declared, raising his wine glass. The other nobles raised theirs in tandem. I did too, of course.

“Cheers!” everyone chorused, then took a sip of their wine.

Now all that remained was to make small talk with the occasional guest while enjoying the delicious food. The meat was quite delectable. I’d been eating palace food every day recently, but today it had even more *oomph*.

“Leticia, don’t overeat,” Lord Clarke, sitting next to me, gently cautioned.

I gave him an “I know, I know” kind of look, and his face turned a light shade of pink. Weird. Why would that make him blush? Had he misunderstood something?

My gut told me not to ask, however, so I just carried on eating. Every so often a guest would come by to congratulate us, though, so it was a struggle to continue my meal in peace. What a shame.

Gradually I was able to eat my fill., As I finally finished, the sound of a piano began to play.

It was time for the dance.

Lord Clarke extended his hand to me, and I graciously took it. This celebration was for us, after all,, so of course we had to dance.

Hand in hand, we headed for the center of the ballroom as everyone around us sighed happily.

As usual, the prince danced smoothly, and I followed his lead. We’d been doing this for a long time at this point, but this was the first time we’d danced together since his love confession. My nerves were oddly frayed. I kept worrying about whether my hands were sweaty, but Lord Clarke simply gazed dreamily at me, smiling. Again, the audience sighed. I felt his hand tighten around my waist.

Unable to avert my gaze, and unable to run from embarrassment, I did my best to keep smiling. *Please, please don’t blush, cheeks. Please!*

Relief washed over me as the song ended, but Lord Clarke didn’t let go of my hand. Typically, we would have stopped dancing after one song, but this time we went into the second immediately.

Internally, I was panicking, but externally, I could do nothing. Every time the prince held me closer than he needed to, I wanted to scream. He looked elated. I wished he didn’t!

“Lettie...”

Every so often, he gently murmured my name. Each time, my heart felt like it was about to leap out of my chest.

“Lettie...”

Right as the second dance was about to end, he snuck a soft kiss on the top of my head, taking care that no one would notice.

That was it. I couldn’t take this anymore. Gently, I pried my hand from his, just as the third song was about to begin.

“I need to retouch my makeup,” I said, smiling sweetly, and madea swift retreat before he could stop me.

In the restroom, I struggled to catch my breath.

“Less... Less charm, please,” I stammered. I panicked briefly when I realized I’d said that out loud, but thankfully, no one was around to hear it.

Phew.

Still, I couldn’t help but think of all the ladies that must’ve been trying to make advances on the prince now that I wasn’t there. The idea made me restless.

Before, the knowledge that he might do something with some Lady Whoever of Wherever had brought me joy. But now...

No, no, this is weird. Weird, I say, I thought, shaking my head to try and clear out these strange thoughts and feelings.

Switching my serious princess mode back on, I went back out to the corridor. Someone was there. Huh. Which noble was this, again? I assumed they had to be foreign, since I didn’t really recognize them.

And then I lost consciousness.

When next I awoke, I was in a carriage.

What? No. No way. Right?

Yes way.

Duchess Leticia Dorman, age seventeen. Kidnapped, for the first time ever.

***

Upon confirming that yes, I had indeed been kidnapped, the first thing that caught my eye was a handsome boy.

And when he saw me, he seemed surprised, and opened his pretty mouth to speak.

“Wh—” He stammered, his lips trembling. “Who the hell are you?”

What kind of person asks who their own victim of kidnapping is?

I tried to answer, but I just mumbled unintelligibly in response. I’d been gagged!

With the best angry voice I could muster, I went “Mrrrgh!” at him. I couldn’t really say anything else.

The beautiful boy paid me no mind, and turned to speak to someone next to me. Which meant someone had been next to me all along!

“Huh? This is the person I was told to fetch,” the man next to me said, as if it were a matter of course.

Annoyed, the boy clicked his tongue. “And what part of *this* looks like the person I asked for?!”

I’m sorry, “this”? Did you just call me “this”?! You take that back!

“Well, Your Highness, she matches the description you gave...” the man trailed off, puzzled.

The boy looked at me and immediately turned his face away. Rude!

“Sure, the hair color matches and whatnot, but this...whoever! Is! The! Entirely! Wrong! Person!”

I glared at him. He didn’t *have* to say it like that, right?

He looked at me and clicked his tongue again. “This! Is! Clearly! Not! Maria! Do you see even the remotest hint of her loveliness? No! You don’t!”

Hey! You take that back right now! I’m plenty lovely, I’ll have you know! Take it back!

It dawned on me that I’d been mistaken for Maria and abducted. Ugh!

“Well, do it yourself, then,” the man muttered quietly. I glanced at him, surprised.

The boy seemed to not hear him and carried on prattling. “How could *anyone* mistake this pint-sized shrimp for my beautiful, slender Maria?! Do you even have eyes?! You’re useless!”

Hey! Who’s pint-sized?! Take that back too!

I mumbled into the gag, trying to rant, but nobody paid me any mind.

Take it baaack!

“But the reality of it is we took this one by mistake. Nothing can be done about that now. So, what would you like to do? And why didn’t you notice when we were putting her in the carriage, for that matter?” the man asked.

The boy gritted his teeth. “Look, I was in a *hurry* to get out of there, okay?! That wasn’t my fault! Also, who *is* this, anyway?”

Oh yeah! Now *you remember that!*

I glanced at the boy and tried to say my name, but yet again I only mumbled. He and the man looked at one another.

“We need information for now,” the man said.

“We do...” the boy agreed, nodding.

The man moved to remove the cloth wrapped around my mouth. I gasped, catching my breath, then glared sharply at the boy.

“You take me back right now!” I snapped. “He called you ‘Highness’, didn’t he? So you’re the prince of someplace, yes? This is going to be a major issue!”

“Please,” the boy said with disdain. “The abduction of some minor noblewoman is hardly an issue. Tell me your name.”

You arrogant brat!

“Leticia of House Dorman, fiancée to His Highness Prince Clarke of Astarl,” I said pointedly.

Granted, I didn’t *want* to be, but I still was!

The moment I said that, their jaws dropped, and the color drained from their cheeks.

“Th-The prince’s, his, fiancée?” the boy stammered.

“Indeed,” I answered grumpily. They both stiffened, pale as sheets. “And that’s why I said this will be an issue! Surely you’re not so stupid as to not understand the consequences of you, a royal, kidnapping me, the fiancée of another royal from a friendly nation!”

These two had kidnapped me at the party, so they must’ve been some sort of royalty from an allied country that had been formally invited.

They looked at one another.

“What do we do? Should we bring her back?” the boy asked.

“I don’t think that’ll help,” the man replied. “With the prince’s fiancée missing, they must all be up in arms right now.”

“You have a point...”

“Why don’t we just leave her here?” the man suggested.

The boy’s eyes lit up. “Oh, good plan!”

“Wait, wait, wait!” I protested. I wasn’t about to let them do that! “Are you two serious? Surely you can guess what’ll happen if you abandon a woman wearing a pretty dress and all this jewelry in the middle of a desolate road!” I pleaded desperately.

I didn’t want to be a prime target for bandits!

The two looked at one another again, and nodded.

“If it’ll spare our country, I don’t care,” said the boy.

“You brutes!” I snapped in protest. Not that there was anything I could do—I was up against two men and my hands were bound behind my back. They picked me up, and I wasn’t able to resist.

Oh no. They’re serious! They’re really serious! I panicked, racking my brain for a solution. *I’m dead, I’m dead, I’m so dead!*

Oh! Wait, I know!

“I-I know where Maria is!” I stammered.

The two stopped just as they were about to throw me out of the carriage.

“This had best not be a lie,” the young man said.

“It’s not!” I exclaimed. “It’s not! I see her every day!”

“What?!”

The man returned me to the seat in the carriage. I sighed, relieved.

While the boy fidgeted restlessly, the man seemed completely indifferent. The boy must’ve been the only one with an interest in Maria, I figured.

As I apologized internally to Maria, I rather wished they’d do something about my bound arms. They were getting sore!

***

“And then, Maria held my hand and smiled. She looked like an angel. I was so taken with her smile! I couldn’t help but wonder how such a beautiful girl could possibly exist in this world, and...”

Regret gripped my heart.

The boy *would not* shut up.

All I’d asked was what his relationship with Maria was, but then he started going on and on like he was narrating a romance novel. It’d been an hour already.

I gave the man next to me a tired look, and he gave me his own right back.

Despite the sheer length of his tale, it hadn’t actually gone anywhere. The only thing I’d managed to glean from it was that he really liked Maria.

“Can you please just summarize this story?” I asked the man, exhausted.

“That may be wise,” he replied, nodding in agreement. He seemed to have also realized the prince would keep going forever if we let him. “This is His Highness Prince Louis, third prince of the Kingdom of Delbaran. They met about five years ago. His Highness was eight, and Maria was twelve. She was the daughter of a local count.”

“Wait, she’s a noble?!” I asked, incredulous.

Unfazed by my shock, he continued, “Lady Maria had come to the royal palace to study etiquette. There, she caught His Highness’s eye, and they quickly became close. They got along quite well, and everyone at the palace thought they were adorable. Like a pair of young siblings.”

“No!” the boy cut in. “Not siblings! Lovers!”

He’d been continuing his tale as though he didn’t care about my conversation with the man next to me, but as soon as he heard ‘siblings,’ he butted in to correct it. Geez.

“Ahem. Everyone at the palace thought they were adorable. Like a pair of young lovers,” the man amended, reluctantly.

Satisfied, the boy beamed. Really? Just that revision had gotten that much of a reaction out of him? Wow.

As I stared in disbelief, he turned to me, angrily. “Hey! You listen to me while I’m talking about Maria!” he demanded.

“Yes, well, you never get to the point,” I retorted.

“I still have a lot to say!”

“You’ve said plenty. At this rate we’ll arrive in your country without any time remaining to think about what we’re going to do!” I pointed out.

He seemed miffed, but mumbled something along the lines of “Fine, whatever,” and finally shut up.

Seriously, kid, get it together! If we arrive in Delbaran like this, without discussing anything, we won’t be able to get our stories straight, and boom! Instant international incident!

Upon seeing that the boy—Prince Louis, was it?—had calmed down, the man resumed his tale.

“But then, Maria’s family made a series of failed investments, and fell into financial ruin. These two, once so close, were forced apart. Her noble house fell into disarray. The head of the family drank himself to death, and Maria’s mother, a native of Astarl, took her daughter to her home country.”

Wow. So many twists and turns! Forget love stories between nobles, Maria! Your own life could’ve been a novel!

“His Highness went through a tumultuous time after that,” the man continued. “He was told he could see her when he grew up, and so he poured heart and soul into his studies and public duties so he could become a man and go fetch Maria.”

“You can go ahead and praise me,” Prince Louis cut in.

“Absolutely not,” I snapped.

“How rude!”

Hah. As soon as I gave him a piece of my mind, he got angry. What a short fuse! A man? Don’t make me laugh.

“When His Highness found out that Lady Maria was working as a handmaiden at the palace in Astarl, he stated he was plenty grown up, and that he was going to go fetch her,” the man continued. “By sheer coincidence, he then received an invitation to the party, and that only steeled his resolve. He decided he was going to kidnap her then and there.”

“Why kidnap her at the party, of all things?” I wondered.

“He wanted to kill two birds with one stone,” the man explained.

“What kind of logic is that?!” I asked Prince Louis, incredulous.

He didn’t answer, seemingly not seeing the error of his ways. The man, however, held his head in his hands. “You understand, then? I was opposed to this, of course! But this fool of a prince had his mind absolutely set on it!”

“What do you mean, ‘fool of a prince’?!” the boy demanded.

“I mean exactly what I said,” the man retorted.

“Why, you!”

“Ah. I’m Lyle, by the way. His Highness’s attendant.”

“Oh, it’s a pleasure,” I said.

“Hey! Don’t introduce yourself!” Prince Louis snapped as I shook Lyle’s outstretched hand. Geez, angry much?

“Well, I understand the situation now,” I said, looking at the prince. “It’s unrequited love, isn’t it?”

“What? No!” he insisted, waving his hands around in a flustered manner. “I *definitely* don’t think she sees me as a little brother and not a man! I *decidedly* don’t want to kidnap her to make her see the light or anything like that!”

Yeah, that was exactly what someone who thought exactly that would’ve said.

I looked at him with pity, and he must’ve caught on, because he immediately recomposed himself.

“You’re just a poor boy, Prince Louis,” I said. “I get that now.”

“Don’t call me a boy!”

“You’re at that age where you want to be seen as an adult, right?”

“Stop!” he snapped, seeming genuinely annoyed. Such an unruly child.

“Well, the only question now is what to do from here,” I said.

The two of them swallowed nervously.

“Why don’t we start by untying my ropes, hm?”

***

I was indignant.

“Hey!” I yelled, slamming my alcohol-filled cup on the rickety table with a *bang*. “*I’m* the victim! Listen to me!”

“No!” Prince Louis refused sharply. Brat!

We were at an inn, eating and discussing what to do. I was hungry after all that, okay? Sure, I’d eaten at the party earlier, but it was fine! It was *fine*.

To my surprise, we couldn’t reach an agreement at all.

My thoughts: “Just take me to your country, offer me monetary compensation for the kidnapping, and let me live among the masses. I’m the victim, so my opinion should take priority!”

Lyle’s thoughts: “We’ll claim we came across Lady Leticia being set upon by thieves on the way back to our country, and return her home. As thanks for this noble act, we’ll propose a marriage between Lady Maria and Prince Louis. Also, I’m not to be accused of any crimes.”

Prince Louis’s thoughts: “I don’t care, as long as I get Maria.”

How could Lyle propose such a diabolical plan so nonchalantly?!

“You jerks! I’m the one who’s a victim of kidnapping here! Me!” I protested, gulping down the drink I’d set on the table. It was my first time drinking beer—a commoners’ beverage—and it was quite tasty, actually.

“But we must aim for a peaceful resolution,” Lyle said as he munched on a salad.

“Uh, aren’t you supposed to use a fork for this?” Prince Louis asked, looking at his food quizzically.

“You eat that with your hands,” I said. “Do you not know anything about how commoners eat?”

“How would I? I’ve lived in the palace all my life!”

Well, that made sense. I’d learned all I could about peasant food so that I’d be able to live like one in the optimistic event that I I managed to avoid my marriage.

“His Highness is quite ignorant about the ways of the world,” Lyle said.

“Hey!” the prince snapped.

“You know I’m right.”

“Hey!” the boy repeated, making no effort to hide his displeasure.

“Well,” I cut in, “considering we don’t know when our pursuers will catch up with us, insisting we *must* stay at a nearby village inn just to bathe and such seems very ignorant to me.”

I mean, if our pursuers were to arrive in this town right now, we’d all be doomed six ways from Sunday.

Lyle nodded in agreement.

“Not washing off after a whole day is too unsanitary!” the prince protested.

“Deal with it!” I told him.

“I can’t!” he snapped. “And I didn’t want to stay in *this* inn, anyway! It’s filthy!”

“Prince! Shhh! Keep your voice down!” I reprimanded him as the gazes of the staff, who’d overheard what he said, fell on us. Read the room, punk!

Prince Louis complained I treated him like a child when I scolded him, but if he didn’t want to be treated like a child, then he needed to stop acting

like one!

“For now, let’s just head back to my country come morning,” he said as he struggled with his unfamiliar meal.

“Why?” I asked.

“We can discuss both your ideas as we go,” he explained. “There’s plenty of time before we get there, so we can brainstorm improvements for both plans on the way.”

Lyle and I exchanged glances.

“Y-Your Highness,” the prince’s attendant stammered.

“Huh,” I said. “Is the food so odd to you that it’s affecting your brain?”

“Are you making fun of me?!” he burst out angrily.

I was just surprised that he’d suddenly said something so insightful!

***

Now the problem was the room allocation at the inn.

See, it was a small place, and it was fairly crowded, so we had only been able to secure two rooms.

My thoughts: “The prince and his attendant should share a room.”

Prince Louis’s thoughts: “It is inconceivable that I would share a room with anyone.”

Lyle’s thoughts: “Can you please stop treating me like I’m in the way?”

He seemed quite sad about that, but I couldn’t exactly give in, either.

“It would be improper for a young woman to spend the night in the same room as a young man,” I insisted.

“It’s fine! You’re not appealing in the slightest,” the prince said.

“What was that?! You take that back right now! I’m bursting at the seams with appeal, I’ll have you know! I ooze femininity!”

“You must’ve oozed it all out, then, because I’m not seeing any.”

“Grr!”

What an infuriating child!

“Would you mind including me in the discussion?” Lyle asked dejectedly. He looked like he was about to cry.

“Lyle...”

The prince and I exchanged looks.

“Well, there’s no other option,” I said.

“There really isn’t,” the prince agreed.

Lyle looked at us, and his face lit up.

“You’re on guard duty,” I said.

“Stay right in front of the door,” the prince added.

Lyle looked at us, and his face fell.

Or maybe it didn’t. Might’ve just been my imagination.

***

Feeling refreshed after my bath, I made a decision.

“Time to run.”

Being penniless might’ve posed a problem, but fortunately for me, there was a rich little prince from a neighboring nation here. I bet no one would notice that I secretly snuck some money from his servant, Lyle. We’d agreed to discuss my situation once we reached their country, but I doubted they were going to be amenable to my arguments.

As for my clothing, we’d already purchased some modest commoner garb in order to stay at this inn without attracting attention, and so that wouldn’t be a problem. On the contrary, actually! These were very easy to move around in.

“Ah, we had fun, didn’t we, prince? Lyle?” I murmured to myself as I reached for the window. Naturally, I had requested the room closest to a tree.

When I opened the window, the distinct aroma of the countryside filled my nostrils, and I breathed it in deeply. One of my favorite scents!

Just then, though, Lyle came running into the room, and hurriedly closed the door behind him.

“Huh?” I said, dumbly.

At first I thought maybe he was going to attack me, but apparently not. Flustered, he plopped down on the floor. Then the door opened again, and a different person came into view.

“L-Lord Clarke?” I stammered.

He wore that wide grin of his as he stepped into the room. Yikes.

“Leticia, what’s the meaning of this?” He walked past Lyle, approaching me in an instant and placing his hands on my shoulders. “Why are you spending the night with another man?”

“*That’s* what you want to know?!” I exclaimed, incredulous. I thought he was talking about the kidnapping incident, but no.

I had no idea how to respond to this sudden accusation. The second I opened my mouth to tell him the truth—that I’d been abducted—Lyle butted in.

“W-We found Lady Leticia on the roadside as she was being kidnapped! We protected her!”

Oh, so he’s going to go with the plan he suggested earlier, is he?!

“That’s not true!” I protested. “These people mistook me for Maria and abducted me!”

“No! We were protecting her!” Lyle insisted. “Also, Lady Leticia was adamant that we take her with us so she could run away!”

“Ack! You traitor!”

“I’m just looking out for myself!” he protested, dropping to his knees before Lord Clarke and desperately begging for forgiveness. “I was only protecting her, I swear!”

“You weren’t!”

“I was!”

“You were not!”

“I was too!”

“You—mmmph!”

I tried to continue, but Lord Clarke placed his hand over my mouth.

“Well, aren’t you two such splendid friends,” he said.

We were not! We were *very clearly* arguing!

I did try to argue my case, but my protests came out as muffled mumbles, and the prince turned to look at Lyle.

“We’ll discuss your claims once we’ve returned to the castle,” he said, smiling sweetly.

Lyle was shaking. I was shaking.

Then the sounds of hurried footsteps approaching echoed, and the door flung open again.

“This is ridiculous! Why are there no attendants to bathe me in this pigsty?!” Prince Louis, the boy responsible for my abduction, complained in all his ignorance. “Wait, what? What’s happening here?!”

He paused, taking stock of the situation, and his face went pale.

“Oh.”

That’s why I said we shouldn’t stay at an inn!

Despite his drained cheeks, Prince Louis still managed to maintain the mannerisms expected of royalty.

“I am Louis, third prince of the Kingdom of Delbaran,” he said. As a royal, he was actually pretty dignified. “I found Lady Leticia as she was being abducted, and protected her from her would-be captors. My deepest apologies for not sending word sooner.”

“I knew it! You’re all traitors!” I shouted. Prince Louis glared at me to stay quiet, but I was *not* going to! He couldn’t make me! “Lord Clarke! It was these two who kidnapped me! I demand that they be punished!”

“P-Please, wait!” Lyle pleaded.

I scoffed. “You’re a traitor, Lyle! Two can play at this game!”

You think you can sell me out, do you?! I’m bringing you all down with me!

“I see,” Lord Clarke cut in. “Well, either way, we should stay here for the night.”

“Huh?” I said, surprised. “But we don’t have enough rooms.”

“You have two rooms, don’t you?” he asked, lifting a hand to stroke my cheek. “Prince Louis, my deepest apologies for the inconvenience, but I’m afraid you’ll have to share a room with your servant. I’ll be staying with Leticia.”

What? No!

I shook my head vehemently at Prince Louis, but that sour-faced kid just pulled Lyle to his feet and dragged him off to the neighboring room.

Wait! Don’t go! Don’t leave me here!

Despite my pleas, they coldly shut the door.

“Lettie.” Lord Clarke pulled me into an embrace, blatantly breaking his promise not to touch me. “I was so worried...”

His voice rang so desperate that I couldn’t help but stare at him in shock.

Oh, right. I’d been abducted. It was pure luck that my kidnappers happened to be nice, but he’d had no means of knowing that. All sorts of things must’ve been going through his mind when he’d come here.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, sincerely apologetic.

The prince’s arms tightened around me, and he held me for a few moments before finally pulling away.

“Oh, by the way, Lettie,” he said with a grin. “Care to explain how you and those men became so close that they could just casually barge into your room?”

Oh no. He was mad.

***

Stuck in a room with no way out, I tasted fear.

Lord Clarke had gone to take a bath. Apparently, all royals found it unbearable to go a single day without one. Weaklings, the lot of them.

This was the best chance I had to get away, and I had to do it pronto.

I opened the window again, climbed down the nearby tree, straightened myself out, and started to run.

“I don’t think so.”

Someone stepped on my skirt, and I fell hard on the ground.

My nose! I think I broke my nose!

Huh. This feels familiar, I thought as I rubbed my nose to make sure it was still in one piece and tried to stand.

And there stood my brother.

“Oh! It’s not Brie this time!” I exclaimed.

“Does that matter?” he asked curtly.

Well, no, it didn’t matter, but...

Struggling, I tried to pull my skirt free from his shoe, but had no success.

“Even if you manage to get away from me, the entire village is surrounded,” my brother said. “You cannot escape.”

Ugh! I was completely trapped!

“Now, hurry on back,” he ordered. “For my future.”

“You only ever care about yourself!” I protested. “Do you not love your sister?!”

“Moderately, yes, but I happen to love myself more.”

“Wow! What an incredibly horrible thing to say!”

“Why thank you,” he said, grinning. “I’ll see you wed no matter what, you know.”

“Nooo!”

“Oh?” he asked, peering into my face. “As my sister, if you *really* tried, I’m sure you’d be able to actually escape.”

“Uh, is that a compliment?” I asked, unconsciously grimacing as he pressed his fingers into my brow.

Stop that! You’re stupid strong! That hurts!

He seemed pleased with himself when I swatted his hand away. It took a truly horrible man to enjoy someone’s suffering like that!

“His Highness isn’t a bad man. He is genuinely fond of you, and as long as you don’t try to escape, he’ll respect your every wish.”

“I mean, I suppose, but...”

“What is it that bothers you, then?”

“It bothers me to not have freedom!”

My brother made a face, exasperated. “You’re still going on about that?”

“I mean...”

“Listen. Even if you don’t marry the prince, I’d still need to arrange a marriage for you that would be beneficial to me. You know this, don’t you?”

“Uh...”

“You’re a noblewoman, Leticia, and a duchess at that, not some low-ranked baroness or viscountess. You cannot escape marriage.”

“Urk...”

I had no argument against that. Marriage was a noble’s duty. I knew that. And my brother was an ambitious man, with a noble’s mindset. There was no way he wouldn’t use me to his advantage. I knew that too.

Yes, I was aware of all of that. But still, I couldn’t just set aside my desire for freedom!

My brother sighed at my silence.

“His Highness, unlike me, is a kind man. When I spoke to him of my plan, I told him to take advantage of you. You won’t find many men who would refrain from doing so when such a golden opportunity presents itself.”

“Huh?”

What did he just say?

“Plan? What plan?”

“What do you mean, ‘what plan’?” he asked. “The plan to get you to drop your mask and get married already.”

“What?! This is the first I’ve heard of this!”

“Of course it is. I wouldn’t tell *you*, would I?” he said nonchalantly.

“Wait, wait, so when Lord Clarke showed up with Brie in tow—”

“That was my idea, yes. Surely you don’t think a man as infatuated as he would’ve cheated on you?”

“And when he practically dragged me back to the castle—”

“My idea,” he confirmed. “I told him to keep you in confinement until the wedding and to do the deed sooner rather than later to properly establish his claim over you, but he chose not to go forward with that last part.”

“Brie’s princess lessons—”

“I arranged those, and I made sure that her lessons were stricter than yours so that she didn’t get any ideas about marrying the prince,” my brother explained. “Oh, but spreading information about the lessons was His Highness’s idea. I could not care less about your reputation, so long as you get married.”

“And all my attempts at escape being thwarted—”

“I did say to not let you escape, of course, but him chasing after you was his own doing.”

“The abduction—”

“Was completely unexpected.”

My brother smirked at my stunned silence.

“You two have been engaged for ten years. He could’ve done anything he wanted in that time, but instead, he was content with just talking to you. You really thought a man like him could’ve come up with this plan?”

I thought back hard on the last ten years, and it was true. Lord Clarke had never so much as held my hand until he’d dragged me back to the castle, despite having had plenty of opportunities.

“His Highness came to me and said he wished for you to be yourself. He wanted you to drop your mask. Therefore, I told him how to get you to stop acting, predicted how you would subsequently behave, and devised the plan.”

My brother knew me better than I knew myself, essentially, was what he meant.

“He’s a better man than I,” he continued. “He’s a lovelorn fool and easily fell for my deception.”

So that was why, when I’d been ecstatic over the annulment of our engagement, Lord Clarke had smiled. That was why, every time I’d done something outrageous, he’d been so amused.

I had no words.

Every move I made, every step I took—I’d just been dancing to my brother’s tune all along.

“Ugh! I can’t believe this!”

“Enough with the futile resistance already,” he commanded, keeping me pinned as I struggled to pull my skirt free.

He was insufferable! Horrible! Trash!

As if my resistance meant nothing at all, he easily hoisted me onto his shoulder.

“Don’t carry me like I’m a piece of luggage!” I yelped.

“This is easiest,” he said flatly. “I’m not nice enough to carry you bridal style.”

With me slung over his shoulder, he strode back into the inn and casually dropped me on my butt at the door of the room I’d been staying in.

“That’s not very nice!” I complained.

“As I just said, yes.”

“You devil!”

“Call me whatever you like,” he said. “ButI do care about you to some extent. I want you to marry a man who will make you happy, if possible.”

With that, he opened the door.

“Now, try to actually face the man for once.”

On the other side of the door stood Lord Clarke.

***

I’d failed to escape. The door closed mercilessly behind me.

Before me was Lord Clarke, fresh from the bath. From the next room over, I could hear the voices of Lyle and Prince Louis arguing about something or another.

“Um, well...” I tried to start a conversation, not knowing what else to do, but the words wouldn’t come to me.

Seemingly amused by my state, Lord Clarke beckoned me over. “Come here, Lettie.”

I took a seat on a chair, and he sat across from me.

“Has Nadir told you anything?”

Nadir was my brother’s name, incidentally.

“No...”

“Really?”

“Um, well, I guess he did tell me some things. Many things, actually. All of the things.”

He smiled kindly at me. “And what would these things be?”

I thought back on what my brother had told me earlier. “He said everything that’s been happening was part of a plan...”

“That’s right,” he admitted matter-of-factly. “And I owe you an apology.”

“An apology?” I stared at him in disbelief.

“Indeed. I stole your freedom from you when you were little, and kept you from being your true self,” he said with a grim expression on his face.

“But that’s just what happens when someone becomes engaged to a royal, right?” I said. “It’s not your fault...”

“That may be so, but it still wouldn’t have happened had I not said I wanted you.”

That was true. I’d become his fiancée because he’d taken an interest in me. My life had changed drastically from that day, and I’d been subjected to thorough and strict princess lessons.

“Still, I had no choice but to arrange an engagement at the time,” he explained. “I’d already received numerous proposals, and you were the daughter of a duke. It would’ve been no surprise if you’d already been claimed. I thought I needed to be quick, or someone else would snatch you away.”

Nobles usually got engaged quickly. The sooner a marriage was agreed upon, the more solid the arrangement was.

“Day after day, you only had forced smiles for me. I was at a loss. I tried to think of what to do, but I couldn’t come up with anything at all, and the day of the wedding was fast approaching. I panicked.” He lowered his head. “Your brother is an ambitious man. He was adamant about your marriage to me, and he knew you well. So I went to him for advice.”

Lord Clarke kept his head low.

“I asked him how to get you to drop your mask. About how to get you to take an interest in me.”

“And that’s why you brought a pretend mistress to the ball?” I asked.

“Yes,” he confirmed, his gaze still low. “Once you found out I had a mistress, you would be happy to consider our engagement annulled. That way, you’d no longer be the fiancée to a prince, and you’d have no more use for your mask. That was Nadir’s plan.”

Just how well could my brother predict people’s actions? What a terrifying man.

“And the confinement was part of it?”

“He said you’d do everything you could to try and escape, and that confinement would be for the best. That even your family had agreed.”

The more he talked, the more obvious it was that this had all been my brother’s scheme.

“He even said I could touch you, but there’s no way I’d ever do something like that.”

“You have my sincerest thanks for not taking things that far,” I told him. I was very glad indeed that he hadn’t laid hands on me.

“Of course I didn’t. I would’ve lost you forever if I had,” he said, finally raising his head.

“See, um,” I mumbled, looking at the prince. “I don’t really understand love and romance and stuff.”

“Right.”

“So I think it’ll take me a long time to get it.”

“Right.”

“A-And I can’t really give up my dreams of freedom.”

“Right.”

“I’ll probably try to run away on a whim.”

“Right.” He laughed softly. His gaze was fixed on me. “I’ll wait however long it takes. Once we’re married, I’ll need you to perform your public duties, of course, but that aside, you’re free to travel and do as you wish. Though it would be an issue if you ran away, so...may I chase after you if that happens?”

I made my decision.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Yes,” I repeated, determined.

“I’ll have to get married either way, whether it’s to you or not,” I explained, reaching over the table to take the prince’s hand. “That being the case, I would rather marry you. And if I’m being honest, you’re my type. I like your face, your voice. And even if you *are* pushy, I don’t hate the fact you’re sweet to me.”

I’d finally made up my mind. I still didn’t understand love or romance, but this man had said he would wait for me to be ready, and I chose to believe him.

Lord Clarke was stunned for a moment, then a smile slowly spread across his lips.

He looked just like the small boy from my hazy childhood memories.

***

“Marry me, Maria.”

“What? I can’t!”

It was amusing to see the young prince being rejected so plainly. He was nothing if not stubborn, though. Prince Louis was apparently making arrangements to come here to study, persistent as he was.

Lyle had whined about wanting to go home. This was hopeless, he’d said. You should give up, he’d said.

The matter of my abduction had been laid to rest. A foreign prince kidnapping me would’ve been quite the scandal, after all, and caused a rift between the two countries. Fortunately, very few people in either country knew about it, and I requested that those who did know think of it as the whims of a child. Nothing terrible had happened, so it would’ve been awful to see a war start over it.

Now I was back in the castle, and could finally relax, right?

You’d think.

“What the heck is this?” I asked.

“Why, those look like iron bars to me,” Brie replied smoothly.

“Um, and why are they here?”

“Your brother’s orders.”

Him again!

“You see,” she explained, “he said that, knowing you, as soon as you arrived at the castle you’d change your mind and try to escape, and so it would be best to keep you here until the ceremony.”

Truly my brother was devoid of even the slightest shred of kindness. He’d covered all his bases.

“Such nice weather, isn’t it?” Brie said, looking at the barred window. The view of the blue sky was ruined. “The windows in the hallway leading

here were similarly barred."

I'm in enough despair and don't need any more, thank you.

I sighed. "If they'd used regular locks I could at least have done something about it."

"Something?" Brie echoed.

"I could've picked them," I explained, much to her surprise.

"And why in the world is that something you know how to do?"

"I spent ten years honing various skills, see, hoping for freedom."

It had been a decade since I'd decided that I wanted to be free, and that if I wasn't freed, I'd simply run away. I'd wasted no time. My schedule was quite busy with princess lessons, but in between, I did all sorts of things to help with my escape plans. I obtained a map of the palace, learned to pick locks, bribed the prince's attendants for information, and tried to get the prince to cheat (though that hadn't worked).

"Hey, do you still not want to be queen?" I asked.

"I do not." Brie flat-out rejected my plea without missing a beat. I wished she'd at least pretended to consider it! "I have my sights set on your brother. He's the heir to a duchy, handsome, smart, tall. What's not to love?"

"He has a terrible personality," I pointed out.

"And his sister is about to be married off," she continued.

"She might return, you know."

"I'll drive her out."

Wow. What an awful sister-in-law candidate. *I'll just tell my brother to stay as far away from her as he can,* I thought. *Wait, but they're birds of a*

feather. Maybe they're meant to be after all.

"So," I said, changing the subject. "Have you come here for a reason?"

"I have," she replied with a smile. "I'm here to keep you from escaping."

At Brie's words, the door behind her creaked open.

***

"Noooooo!" I wailed as I was forced into a wedding dress.

"Madam, you really should just accept it," Maria said.

"It's too soooooon!"

"Well, if this doesn't happen soon, you'll change your mind. So your lord brother said."

"I hate hiiiiiim!" I whined.

"You should be more graceful in defeat," Brie cut in.

"I don't wannaaaaaa!"

I was on the verge of tears. Which, incidentally, would've upset the makeup artists, so I held back. It'd ruin the makeup, they said. Jerks.

"Briiiiiie! You traitoooooor!"

"It was your brother's request," she said sweetly, going right back to her usual fake pleasantries.

She was so grating! *So* grating!

"Looks like you're all set," my irritating candidate for sister-in-law said.

"You look beautiful, madam," Maria said.

“Ughhhhh...” I groaned.

They’d finished getting me ready at last.

“Now, time’s wasting, so *do* hurry, yes?” Brie said.

I didn’t want to!

Actually, maybe I did. Or did I? I didn’t know anymore and it was confusing me!

But no one cared about my feelings on the matter.

Soon, I was made to wait in front of those terrifying doors.

“I wanna go home,” I whined.

“Accept it,” Brie, who stood behind me, said. “Now go!”

She pushed my back firmly, and with the momentum of it, I ended up pushing the doors open.

I couldn’t run anymore! The nerve of that hag!

Mustering my courage, I looked ahead and started walking. People started clapping, congratulating me. That felt strange. Maybe it had been fate that had brought me here.

“You look beautiful, Lettie,” the prince said dreamily when I reached him.

“You look beautiful yourself, Lord Clarke,” I replied.

“I’m so happy,” he told me, beaming as usual.

The priest in front of us said something or another. I had my hands full dealing with my own feelings, so I wasn’t paying attention.

I thought I was ready. I really did. As it turned out, though, the real thing was a whole other beast.

My brains and heart were completely scrambled. I didn’t know what to think. But I wasn’t opposed to what was happening—at some point, I’d stopped being against it. I didn’t know what to do with those feelings, though, and I was completely overwhelmed.

“Lettie,” Lord Clarke whispered in my ear. “I’ll always come find you, no matter how many times you try to run.”

With that, he brought his handsome face close to mine, and the faint sound of a kiss echoed through the hall.

The crowd erupted into cheers. Trumpets played nonstop. My brother and Brie were smirking. Maria was bawling. Prince Louis stood next to her, brushing away her tears. Lyle looked like he couldn’t care less.

I couldn’t run away anymore.

Unable to comprehend what I was feeling, I clung to the man holding me.

Clarke’s First Love

Boring.

My every day was taken up by lessons preparing me to become the next king. I was sick of the nobles constantly trying to gauge my mood. Day after day, over and over.

On top of that, people kept suggesting that I needed to decide on a fiancée.

Boring, I thought yet again with a sigh.

I was taking a shortcut across the courtyard when I felt an odd breeze.

Some sort of sound, like a groan, rang out. I looked around, thinking it might be an animal, but saw nothing.

Another groan.

My curiosity was further piqued. Something was definitely nearby. I really needed to know what was making that noise.

A longer, more drawn-out groan this time.

It’s coming from this tree.

Convinced of this, I stopped in front of the tree, and examined it carefully. There were no signs of an animal hiding anywhere—but then the groan rang out again.

It’s coming from above!

I craned my neck up to look, and saw what looked like a person. Squinting, I realized it was a young girl.

Another groan.

She was the one making the sound!

“Is she snoring?”

I had no idea children could snore so loudly.I’d never heard such a sound before, and I found myself oddly impressed by it.

But sleeping in a tree was dangerous, I felt.

“You there,” I called out.

She groaned.

“Hey,” I tried again.

She didn’t stir, and just groaned again.

“Wake up!” I yelled, annoyed.

“Eek!” she yelped, jumping awake.

Jumping like that while perched in a tree had an obvious consequence.

“Oh no.”

The world slowed to a crawl as the tiny figure fell towards me. Instinctively, I stretched out my arms.

“Oof!”

I closed my eyes with the impact and cried out in pain from the pressure on my abdomen. She was a tiny girl, but falling from a height like that, she obviously felt heavy. Slowly, I opened my eyes again.

The girl was staring blankly down at me. She’d just woken up, so she must’ve been confused. Judging by her pretty dress, I thought she had to be

a high-ranking noble's daughter. I'd never heard of a noble lady napping in a tree like that, though.

I studied her for a moment, checking for injuries, and to my relief, she seemed fine.

We stared at each other for a while. Then, with a brief exhale, as if she'd just realized something, she opened her mouth to speak.

"Thank you!" she said, smiling.

It was the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen. You'd think I'd have been used to seeing people smile by then, but I was completely taken, and stunned into silence.

I'd never seen such an innocent smile before. Her eyes were curved in happiness, framed by long lashes, and her mouth was set in a wide, joyful grin.

She's so cute, I thought earnestly.

"I must be heavy! I'll move!" she exclaimed, getting off of me.

The sudden absence of her weight was oddly disappointing.

"Leticia!" a loud voice called out.

"Father!" the girl responded, happily running over to the source of the voice.

"Were you sleeping in a tree again?!" the man scolded her.

"But it's nice!" she protested.

"You can't do that here anymore!"

"Boo!" she whined, puffing her cheeks. I wanted to touch them.

“My deepest apologies, Your Highness,” the man she’d called her father said, bowing his head to me.

“It’s fine,” I told him.

“My daughter has caused much trouble,” he said as he stood up straight. “Leticia. Apologize.”

“I’m sorry,” the girl said.

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied.

She smiled, sighing in relief. “You should sleep up there too! It’s really nice!”

“L-Leticia!” the young girl’s father snapped at her, then turned to me once more. “My apologies for the inconvenience. If you’ll excuse us...”

Perhaps hoping to prevent his daughter from any further impropriety, the father picked her up and hurried off.

“Leticia, huh?” I repeated the girl’s name out loud.

I wanted to see her again.

I wanted to touch her.

I’d never felt anything like this before. There was a warmth, a fullness in my heart.

Pressing my hand to my chest, I went back inside the palace. I had to speak to my father.

I had to tell him what I wanted.

***

Soon, Leticia and I were engaged.

The messenger sent to her family reported that the duke's son had been quite pleased, even more than the duke himself.

So her older brother has more than his share of ulterior motives, huh? I'll be careful of him.

After the engagement was arranged, Leticia came to the palace every day. Her princess lessons had already begun.

She may have been only seven, but it was typical for such things to begin at a young age. Leticia, small as she was, worked hard to refine herself and learn everything her new education had to offer.

It was adorable.

Her earnestness was endearing, and I often went out of my way to steal a peek at her from afar.

She was adorable.

I wanted some time with Leticia all to myself, of course, and so I'd arranged for a daily teatime with her of about an hour on days that she came to the castle.

Leticia would hum and nod in acknowledgement of everything I said. I appreciated that, of course, but she rarely spoke, herself. Since the start of her princess lessons, she was no longer the cheerful girl from before. Instead, she acted like the perfect noble lady.

Was it because of her lessons? Had she changed because of me?

Though I felt guilty, I still wanted her.

I was unable to let her go, but still the distance between us remained the same. Before I knew it, ten years had passed.

It wasn’t as if I was just twiddling my thumbs all that time, either. During teatime, I always offered Leticia plenty of praise, sympathy, and apologies for her hardships. All of it seemed to just bounce right off of her. Her reactions never changed, even when we went out to have fun, or when I gave her gifts.

This was bad.

My mind was racing. I ended up seeking advice from someone who I normally would never have consulted.

“So, any ideas?” I asked.

“About what?” Leticia’s older brother, Nadir, asked in an aloof manner.

“How does Leticia feel about me? I need to know.”

“Well,” he mused, bringing a hand to his chin. “May I speak frankly?”

“Please do. I won’t be offended.”

“In that case,” Nadir began with a resolute look, “she barely has any interest in you at all.”

He said this so bluntly that I was stunned for a moment, but quickly I realized he had a point.

“I see,” I said.

“She does acknowledge you as the prince she’s engaged to, but little beyond that. There’s no romance, no love involved. I’m not even sure if she remembers what you look like.”

Things were worse than I’d thought.

“Does she hate me?” I asked.

“Not even that,” Nadir replied. “I think she’s simply indifferent.”

A sigh escaped my lips. “But I love her so much...”

“Those feelings are completely unrequited,” he mercilessly pointed out.

“So the reason she never responds when I speak to her is...”

“Because it’s little more than background noise to her.”

In other words, it all went in one ear and out the other.

“Personally,” Nadir continued, “as long as Your Highness marries Leticia, this doesn’t bother me.”

“It bothers *me*,” I protested. “I don’t like this. At this rate, our marriage will become nothing more than a distant dream.”

“Your Highness,” Nadir uttered, sounding troubled.

“I want to bring out the real Leticia,” I said.

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t want our married life to be reduced to going through the motions.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I love her as she is.”

“Uh-huh.”

Nadir just kept muttering the same vague acknowledgement over and over.

“Is there anything that can be done?” I asked.

“Are you saying you won’t marry her if there isn’t?”

“Yes,” I said with a nod.

Nadir chuckled. “Your Highness. I know how taken you are with Leticia. Such empty threats won’t work.”

“Well, I won’t have children with her until she’s developed solid feelings for me,” I said flatly, causing an astonished Nadir’s jaw to drop. “That would be a problem, wouldn’t it?”

Nadir’s voice was shaky, an unusual sign of his distress. “You can’t simply choose not to—”

I smiled. “I have a younger brother. His child can succeed me.”

“Your brother is only two years old, no?”

“He’ll grow up eventually. He’ll come of age and be able to sire a child in no time at all.”

“Now *this* is a problem,” Nadir murmured, running a hand through his hair in exasperation.

“What do you think I should do?” I asked a second time.

Finally, Nadir reluctantly spoke. “Well, she needs to see you as a potential partner first.”

“And how would I go about making her do that?”

Nadir seemed to be deep in thought for a moment before looking up, seemingly having had an idea.

“Find yourself another lover,” he suggested.

“No,” I replied instantly.

“It can be just for show,” Nadir added quickly. “Leticia’s been trying to annul this engagement for a long time.”

“Indeed. She keeps sending people my way.”

“Oh. You’ve noticed?

Ever since my engagement to Leticia, other people had been aggressively making passes at me. I’d been approached by women before, of course, but this was beyond blatant. All sorts of different types of women would show up—recently, even men had started to try their luck. It was obvious.

Next I saw her, I’d need to advise her to stop hiring people for so little. She needed to hire professionals, or her plan would never work! Those were pricey, though.

“Well, that aside,” Nadir continued. “Leticia wants to escape. If she sees you with another woman, she’ll gladly show her true colors, I believe.”

“Huh.”

“When that happens, she’ll probably say all sorts of things, but you must not, and I cannot stress this enough, you *must not* explicitly say that the engagement is broken off. I repeat, you must not do that.”

That’s a lot of emphasis.

“You think that’ll work?” I asked nervously.

“Your Highness,” Nadir began confidently, “how many years do you think I’ve been keeping an eye on my sister? I know her very well.”

I wasn’t fully sold yet, but I had no one else I could ask. If things stayed as they were, we’d end up in a marriage of convenience. It was better to try than to do nothing.

“And who should I choose as this fake lover?”

“Someone who’s not the sharpest tool in the shed,” he suggested.

“Not the sharpest tool in the shed,” I echoed, looking around me.

We were at the venue for a ball. Leticia wasn't attending this time; I'd approached Nadir because there was no risk of her overhearing our conversation.

Suddenly, a young lady caught my eye. She approached a nobleman and took his arm, but he brushed her off with practiced ease and left. The young lady stood there for a moment, then took a glass of wine from the table.

She downed it in one gulp.

With a loud bang, she slammed the glass back on the table and clicked her tongue.

"Well, if he can't recognize the value of these melons, that's his loss," she said, in a completely different tone from before.

Our eyes met as I stared at her.

"Your Highness!" she exclaimed, her voice changing instantly once more. Wow.

"What do you think?" I asked Nadir.

He took a look at the young lady, then nodded. "I think she's a solid candidate. She doesn't look very sharp at all."

With Nadir's approval, I made my decision and stepped forward, approaching the not-very-sharp-looking young lady.

"Hello. Do you have a moment?"

***

The result was about halfway between success and failure.

Leticia had hidden away in her family's territory much faster than I'd anticipated.

"Didn't you say it'd work?" I said, glaring resentfully at Nadir.

He just shrugged. “This is only the beginning.”

“What?”

“This has finally made her take notice of you,” Nadir explained. “*Now* the game begins.”

Ah. He did say it was important for her to see me as a potential partner first. So this ordeal was the first step toward that goal.

“What next, then?” I asked.

Nadir looked positively evil as he explained the next part of his plan.

“That’s a bit...” I grimaced.

“There’s no other way,” he cut in categorically.

I thought about it for a moment.

“I’ll go see Leticia, then decide.”

***

Leticia had run off to a rural village that, even within House Dolman’s territory, was seen as remote.

It was rich in nature. Exactly the kind of place Leticia loved, I thought.

As I approached the estate, I saw Leticia prancing about, wearing the same carefree smile as the day I’d fallen for her.

Leticia was indeed still Leticia.

I was relieved that she hadn’t changed, but the sinking feeling that I’d forced her into becoming someone she wasn’t reared its head again.

Enough princess lessons, I decided. She’d mastered all of the basics, and at this point she was just reviewing them over and over. There was no need.

I followed the cheery Leticia to a river, where she eagerly attached some bait to the end of her fishing line. Now that I thought about it, I did remember her saying something about fishing when she declared our engagement broken. Despite my repeated questions during our daily tea parties, she'd never once mentioned it. I was moved to finally learn something about her.

Seeing her so happy, I decided to have a river created within the palace grounds.

Leticia caught a fish and prepared it with ease. She even started the fire, to my surprise. Then, she skewered and grilled it, looking very pleased with herself.

How adorable.

She was so cute when she was in high spirits.

"You look like you're having fun," I said, and she seemed to finally take notice of me, her eyes widening in surprise.

Seeing her mask drop like that, I couldn't help but smile.

"Lord Clarke?" she said, seemingly a bit puzzled by my presence. Her attitude didn't change, however, and she simply regarded me rudely. "How may I help you?" she asked, merrily bringing her fish to her lips.

I wonder if it turned out well?

"Is that your lunch for the day?"

"Yes. It's quite tasty."

"And you caught it yourself?"

"I did. I take pride in my fishing skills. And my tree-climbing skills. And my running skills," she said, munching as she spoke. She reminded me a bit of a squirrel.

Once she was done eating, she went right back to fishing, cheerfully humming a tune. I suspected she'd forgotten I was there.

The quiet village. The river. The occasional fish leaping out from the current. I sighed with relief at the sight of Leticia at this place, surrounded by the things she loved, enjoying herself.

I took a seat next to her as she hummed, and she gasped as she looked at me. I'd been right—she'd completely forgotten I was there.

"Well? May I help you with anything?" she repeated.

"No, nothing in particular."

"Huh?"

She was cute even when confused.

"You're quite lively," I said.

"Freedom does that to someone."

"You haven't changed at all."

"Pardon?" she asked as she turned to me, knitting her brows in mounting confusion.

"Do you know why I got engaged to you?"

"I wasn't interested in knowing, so no," she replied without missing a beat.

It was just as Nadir had said. Knowing she hadn't paid any attention to me at all made my heart sink.

"You came crashing right down that tree."

Leticia stared at me, still perplexed.

“Ten years ago, you came to the palace alongside Duke Dorman. You climbed a tree in the courtyard, remember? I happened to be passing by, and you came crashing down right on top of me.”

Leticia’s gaze shifted upwards for a moment, probably reminiscing.

“I was so shocked. You just sat on top of me and laughed.”

A fish bit, and her attention shifted. She skillfully went about preparing that one too.

“That was adorable,” I continued, despite her diverted focus.

She skewered it.

“It was love at first sight. I requested the engagement.”

“So it was *your* fault!”

“I’m quite pleased with how things turned out. Aren’t you?”

“Of course not! I suffered every day for *ten whole years* because of that!” she shouted angrily, starting another fire.

Her deftness was enchanting. I was elated to see this side of her I hadn’t known before.

“But you couldn’t be honest about not wanting the engagement, so you kept sending women my way, didn’t you?”

“You knew?!”

She really believed I hadn’t noticed? I was a little disappointed.

“Oh, by the way, you and I are still engaged,” I told her, wanting to make this important fact clear.

“Whuh?” she mumbled, staring vacantly at me with her mouth hanging open.

I smiled at her reaction and stood before continuing, “I’ll come back for you soon. Feel free to relax until then.”

“P-Pardon?!” she shrieked behind me as I left.

She’d only just started taking notice of me. I had no idea how long it’d take for that to turn into affection, however.

Nadir’s idea surfaced in my mind. I found it offensive, but I saw no option other than to go along with it.

I had to make preparations.

Swift action was needed to prevent her from escaping. I mentally went through the list of things I had to do.

***

Leticia and I had finally gotten married.

An unwelcome voice pulled me out of my blissful reverie, ruining my moment.

“Well, obviously,” Nadir said. “To fabricate Leticia’s misunderstanding, I organized a party, made sure all the guests were people I trusted wouldn’t leak information, and then casually suggested that she should run away to a rural area in my family’s territory. After returning to the capital, I made arrangements to ensure she stayed confined within the castle. With all these pieces in place, it’s only natural you two were wed.”

“You act as if this were a huge favor you did for me,” I mumbled, fed up with him and his smug grin.

“Now all I need is for you and Leticia to produce an heir. Please do get around to that.”

“If Leticia agrees, certainly,” I said bluntly.

Nadir looked at me in surprise. “You’ve consummated the marriage, yes?”

“We have not,” I replied, prompting Nadir’s jaw to drop. “I won’t lay a hand on her until she consents.”

“You can’t be serious,” he said.

“I’m quite serious,” I told him, grinning. “I’ll wait as long as it takes. Who knows, maybe it’ll take decades!”

Seeing the frustration in Nadir’s face gave me great satisfaction.

Don’t think everything’s going to go according to your plan.

I’d joined forces with him so I could marry the real Leticia, but now that we were wed, I had all the time in the world to court her. I’d asked for his cooperation under the condition that we’d produce an heir, but I’d never said *when* that would happen, so as far as I was concerned, there was no problem.

Nadir, ever in a hurry to strengthen his ties to the royal family, must’ve been seething.

“How unpredictable a man madly in love is,” he muttered.

You have no idea, I thought to myself with a chuckle.

***

“Maria! Put this on!”

“No!”

“I’m the mistress! You’re the handmaiden! One of us has the power here!”

“I’m under direct orders from His Highness Prince Clark!”

Leticia was adorably frustrated by Maria’s retort, gritting her teeth. She was so riled up that she hadn’t noticed me coming in, it seemed. Even her dumb moments were cute.

“Well, I’m the... The... The... The crown prince’s, uh, wife!” she blurted out, her face turning beet red as she asserted her position.

“Please stop being so embarrassed about saying that!” Maria protested, looking exasperated. “It’s making me flustered too!”

“I-I’m not embarrassed!”

“A blatant lie! Why can’t you just admit you’re happy you got married?”

“I-I’m not, okay?!”

“You’re not convincing anybody looking like that.”

A beet-red Leticia asserted that Maria had it all wrong. And indeed, she wasn’t fooling anyone.

“You’re so rude, Maria.”

“I’m simply honest!” Maria said with a bright smile, her good nature on full display.

The redness faded considerably from Leticia’s cheeks, and yet again she pushed something at Maria.

“Ugh, whatever! Just wear this!”

“I will absolutely, decidedly not!”

“Just do it! Put it on and go seduce Prince Louis! It’ll be hilarious!”

“Would you please stop trying to use me to bully him?!”

Maria pushed back vigorously, and Leticia pushed just as hard.

“Just imagine the nosebleed that spoiled little prince would get from seeing you in this! It’d be too much for him! He’d faint for sure!”

“Yes! It *would* be too much! This is see-through!”

The two kept pushing a fluttery, thin piece of clothing back and forth that would *definitely* have been too much for a thirteen-year-old boy.

“I even went to the trouble of getting Brie to bring me this negligée!”

“Please stop wasting your energy on such things!”

I approached the quarreling duo and confiscated the garment.

“Oh!”

The two froze in place.

“Lettie,” I said, grinning, leaning in to whisper into her ear. “Are you going to wear this for me?”

Her face turned so red I feared it might start boiling.

“It, it, it—” she stammered, her mouth opening and closing repeatedly as she struggled to form words. How cute. “It’s still too soon for that!”

She snatched the negligée from me and bolted out the open door. I could hear the soldiers’ voices echoing outside, yelling “Your Highneeess!” as they chased after her.

Maybe I should do that too, I thought as I stepped out, wondering how long it’d take me to catch her.

I Don’t Want to Wear It

“It’s not true!”

“What’s not— Buh!”

As soon as I pushed the door open, I threw what I’d been holding at the person in the room, hitting him squarely in the face.

“What the hell?! What *is* this thing?!” my victim exclaimed, trying to pry the object—now firmly wrapped around his head—off his face, to no avail.

The sight cheered me up a little.

“Hmph! It’s a gift from me to you! Be grateful!”

“I don’t even know what this is!” the young prince said, flailing about wildly as he tried to free himself. With his pretty face concealed, he just looked like a dumb idiot acting like a dumb idiot.

“It’s a sexy, see-through negligée!”

“Huh? It’s a what now?!” he mumbled, seemingly not comprehending what I’d said. After a few seconds, he seemed to finally get it, and began thrashing about again. “Don’t put indecent garments on me!”

“You’re making it sound a lot more indecent by wording it like that instead of just saying ‘negligée,’ you know.”

“It is *plenty* indecent!” he exclaimed.

Finally, he fell off his chair and started rolling around on the floor. Lyle, by the way, was just watching it all unfold and doing nothing to help at all. What a great guy!

“You think you can just do this to me and get away with it?!” the prince threatened.

”Yeah! I mean, I’m the, the, the crown princess!”

“Stop stuttering when you say that!”

“That’s besides the point!” I protested. Why was everyone so caught up on that?! It was irrelevant! “I’m this country’s future queen. You’re just the third prince of a neighboring nation. Get it?”

“This is abuse of power!”

“Just be a good tool for stress relief!”

“You’re horrible!”

“Shut up! I’m just messing with you a little!” I said as I began to roll his struggling form around on the floor myself.

“Hey! Stop that!” he demanded.

I wasn’t going to stop, though. Hmph! He’d had me tied up with rope before! A little discomfort in turn was only fair! I had done him a great favor by not telling anyone other than Lord Clarke and my brother about the kidnapping incident, after all!

“Lyle!” the prince called out. “Lyle, help me!”

“My apologies,” Lyle replied. “I am a firm believer in observing the power hierarchy.”

“You useless—”

Aw, they looked like they were having so much fun! What great friends this master-servant duo were. The sight soothed my spirits a little, and I stopped rolling the prince around.

“I’m dizzy,” Prince Louis groaned, the negligée still stuck to his face.

“Poor thing,” I said.

“*You* did this!”

“I could continue, if you want.”

“N-N-N-No!” he stammered, desperately shaking his head. “No, I’m good!”

Fine. I’ll be merciful.

“By the way,” Prince Louis said, somehow managing to sit up—without any help from Lyle, mind you. “What’s not true?”

Oh. Right, the thing I’d said when I’d walked into the room.

“It’s just not true!”

“Uh.”

“Look, listen, I wasn’t, I mean, I didn’t, you know, I wasn’t *actually* going to wear it! It just slipped out! It was a heat of the moment thing!”

“Uhh...”

“So it’s not true!” I exclaimed as I started rolling Prince Louis around again.

“Augh!” he yelled.

It wasn’t true! It *wasn’t*, okay?! I hadn’t *meant* it when I said it was “still too soon”! That wasn’t what I’d wanted to say!

I wasn’t going to wear it at all! Ever!

“Lettie?” a voice called out—one I wasn’t expecting to hear.

“Eep!” I jumped.

“You know,” Lord Clarke said, smiling as he stood at the door, “I know I said I’d chase after you if you ran, but I didn’t say you could run into another man’s room.”

“Eek!”

Oh no. He was furious!

“What man?” I asked. “He’s a kid. A toy!”

“Hey!” Prince Louis protested.

“Toy or no, you can’t do this,” Lord Clarke said.

“Hey!”

The young prince continued to protest, but I couldn’t afford to pay him any mind right now. I had to do something about Lord Clarke looming over me!

I laughed nervously. “I was just, you know, engaging in some friendly cross-cultural communication!”

“Why don’t you do that with me, then?”

Oh. I guess that excuse won’t work, I thought as Lord Clarke unceremoniously came closer and scooped me up into his arms. Bridal style. *Bridal* style!

“Pardon the interruption, gentlemen,” the older prince said. “Oh, and please, keep that. I’ll be sure to give her my own gift.”

Gift?! What gift?! I wanted to shout, but the words didn’t come out.

“Now, if you’ll excuse us,” Lord Clarke said, stepping out of the room.

From behind us, Prince Louis shouted, “Knock next time!”

Fair point, honestly.

Oh, incidentally, the next day, I received a complaint from Maria that Prince Louis had given her a negligée. I thought she should just wear it, frankly.

I Absolutely, Positively Don’t Want to Wear It

“I got a negligée.”

“Hm? Are you bragging about your husband, now?”

“No I’m not!”

Brie was *totally* off the mark! I was not! I would never!

“Are you implying something just because I have yet to marry rich? Are you challenging me?”

“What part of what I said sounded like that?!”

She was clearly misunderstanding something, but despite my protests, she gave me a glance and snorted, denying it. I was the crown princess! I was not to be snorted at!

“You just casually told me your husband gave you a negligée,” she said.

“What about it?”

“Any sane person would think you’re rubbing it in my face.”

“They would not!”

“Why else would you be telling me what you do behind closed doors?”

“We’re not doing anything!”

“Locked doors, even.”

“No one’s locking anything!”

Brie shook her head. “You don’t understand at all, do you?”

“What?”

“This is why they say love is a drug.”

“I have no idea what you’re saying.”

Brie let out a sigh at me. Rude! Rude, Brie!

“Enough of that already,” I said.

“Hmm?”

“What matters is how to prevent him from giving me more!”

Brie seemed to ponder this for a moment. Then a flash of inspiration crossed her features.

“Why not wear it?”

“What?”

“Wear it once, say you like this one. How’s that?”

“Uh, no?”

How the heck would that make anything better? I wondered, a question mark floating above my head.

Brie sighed. Again, rude. She really needed to mind her manners around her superiors!

“I’m just saying that if you bat your eyelashes at him and claim this one’s your favorite, he probably won’t send you as many.”

“I don’t want to wear it at all, though.”

“Just once! It’s fine!”

“But I’d have to wear it in front of Lord Clarke, wouldn’t I?”

“Uh, obviously? Are you dumb?”

“Nope! No thanks! Denied!”

“It’s a pretty good idea, though,” she says, clearly not understanding my viewpoint.

I mean, come on, right? I said I didn’t want him to give me any more, so why the heck would I wear the thing?

“Well, I can’t really say much about it either way,” Brie said.

“What? Why?”

“I’m getting a referral bonus for directing His Highness to that store.”

“So *you’re* behind this!”

What the hell?! The enemy was hiding in plain sight!

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I was unfolding the negligée Lord Clarke had given me.

Not because I wanted to wear it or anything!

I *did not* want to wear it! But I *was* a little curious.

The one I’d gotten from the prince was less sheer than the one I’d gotten from Brie. It felt somewhat demure, even. Was this his preference? Cute over sexy? Hmm.

Wait, why did I care about what his preferences were? I didn’t!

I took the negligée in my hand. As the fabric spread out over my open palm, I could faintly see through it. Ah, so it was this slight sheerness that men of this generation liked.

Rather than putting everything on full display, a little bit of secrecy added to the excitement, Lyle had told me.

I stood up and held it over my nightgown—I could see it underneath the negligée. Which meant, if I wore this *without* the nightgown... Oh no.

No, this wouldn’t do. This wouldn’t do at all.

Shaking my head, I pulled the negligée away from me. This thing was dangerous. Whoever invented this should’ve been arrested.

“Lettie.”

Oh no.

I was so stiff as I turned around that my joints were creaking. There stood Lord Clarke, the last person I wanted to be in this room with.

“Wh-Why are you...?”

“W-Well, I knocked, but you...”

He had?! I hadn’t heard a thing!

Panicking, I hid the negligée behind my back.

“Do you need anything?” I asked.

“I just wanted to say good night,” he replied, covering his mouth with his hand. “Lettie...”

“Night! Nighty-night! Good night! Sleep tight!”

“Lettie.”

I said good night! That was all he wanted, wasn’t it?!”

Lord Clarke didn’t budge at all, despite my earnest wishes for him to turn on his heel and walk away.

“Lettie,” he repeated again.

Could he please stop doing that and just tell me whatever it was he came here to tell me?! If he had something to say, then he should’ve just been clear about it!

“Lettie,” he said. Again.

Finally, he removed his hand from his mouth. Then moved it to his nose.

“The, the negligée...” he stammered.

“Y-Yes?”

“I think it’s still a bit much for me...” he trailed off, sounding a little congested from holding his nose.

Then he unsteadily dragged his feet out of the room.

“Huh? What was that about?” I asked aloud, having been left alone, confused and in disarray.

Something had to have happened to Lord Clarke, but what?

Well, at least the whole negligée business ended that day, though I *was* told to keep the one I already had.

Why, though?

But You’re Not Cute

Before me was an angel.

“Leti!” the angel cooed, my name awkward on his lips as he reached out both hands for me in invitation. I readily accepted.

“Mathias, you’re so cute!” I exclaimed, hugging him tightly until his cute little voice yelped a tiny “Ow!”

Oh no. He was so cute I’d gone overboard.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. He smiled brightly at me in response.

An *angel*, I tell you. I could’ve keeled over right there and then and I’d have died happy.Overwhelmed by his cuteness, I pressed a hand to my chest and laughed softly.

“You really love Mathias, don’t you, Lettie dear?” the queen asked, watching Mathias and I with delight.

I loved him. I loved him so much.

Lord Mathias was my angel. At only two, he was still wobbly on his feet. He was the king and queen’s second child, and the younger brother of my husband, Lord Clarke. In other words, my brother-in-law.

Imagine having this little piece of heaven for a brother-in-law!

“Oh, he’s so cute it hurts,” I murmured.

Mathias tilted his head to the side. That gesture! I was dead. Deceased.

“The best thing about getting married is getting Mathias as a brother-in-law,” I murmured dreamily as I gazed at him. The queen once again laughed, amused.

Children were so cute. Angels, all of them. And he looked so much like the queen, his features so well-proportioned! Imagine what he'd look like, all grown up! He looked nothing like his father. Lord Clarke had taken after his mother, too. Where'd the king's genes gone?

Were they going to grow up to be plump like him?

My eyes met Lord Clarke's as he gazed at me and his brother. He was smiling softly.

Yep. I hoped he'd stay handsome as he aged. I considered recommending exercise as he got older.

The queen, looking at me, laughed once again. "Mathias looks just like Clarke, you know."

Hm?

Lord Mathias shifted his gaze up, from me to the queen.

"Why, dear, they're so alike they could be twins," she said. "Shall I show you some of Clarke's old portraits?"

"Oh, no thank you."

"Aw, that's too bad," she said, looking pleased.

Lord Clarke, standing next to her, also looked pleased. "I see. Well, you have my full blessings to dote on Mathias."

'I see'? What does he see?

I was a bit perplexed, but he *had* just given me his blessings to dote on Lord Mathias, so I was going to take full advantage of it. Oh, he was so cute! His cheeks were so squishy.

"Leti! It tickles!"

“You’re sooo cute!” I exclaimed, chuckling as I nuzzled his jiggly cheeks. He whined, but I was too absorbed in the feeling to care. I kept on nuzzling and nuzzling, and he cooed and cooed. Figuring he was enjoying it, I nuzzled him even more.

“So soft! So squishy!”

Mathias laughed brightly.

“Sooo soooft!”

He laughed again. Even his laugh was cute. Truly he was an angel. There was no mistaking it.

I could do this all day, I thought, leaning in for his cheek again when it was abruptly pulled away from me. Huh? Why?

Lord Clarke, who held Lord Mathias in his arms, smiled brightly at me, and handed his brother over to their mother.

“Nooo! Lord Mathiaaas!” I whined.

As I unconsciously reached for the warmth that had escaped me, Lord Clarke caught my hand.

What the?

I tried to shake myself free, to no avail.

Lord Clarke leaned closer to whisper into my ear. Why did he always have to do that?! Couldn’t he talk like a normal person, for once?!

“Lettie,” he murmured, his breath tickling my ear. I wished it didn’t! “Apparently, I look just like Mathias.”

Yes. That was what the queen had said!

“If that’s the case,” he began, pulling away and looking straight at me as he spoke. I wished he didn’t! “Why don’t you dote on me instead?”

He began to nuzzle my shoulder. Eep!

“I-I-I-I,” I stammered.

“Yes?”

“I can’t!”

With that, I took off running. I could hear him laughing behind me. *Don’t laugh! Don’t laugh at me!*

And thus began my game of tag with Lord Clarke, as the queen and Lord Mathias leisurely watched.

I Can’t Say It

My heart kept faltering lately!

This was no good, I told myself, shaking my head. No good at all.

This was weird. I wasn’t the type to be easily swayed like this.

“Huh? You’re married! Isn’t it a bit too late for that?”

“Don’t say it’s ‘too late’, Maria!” I snapped, glaring at her. She frowned and backed off. “I want to make him speechless.”

“You could just ask him to not speak,” Maria suggested.

“That’s not what I mean! That’s not what I mean at all, Maria!”

“I’m sure he’ll listen to a request from the future queen. You could even ask him to spin around three times and bark.”

“I will not ask him that. I will *definitely* not ask him that.”

“What a pity...” Maria murmured. She seemed really disappointed. This girl was really something. I mean, I knew that, but still!

“Anyway, that’s not what I meant! I meant I want to surprise him.”

“Surprise him, you say?” Maria asked, making a cute, pensive gesture, as if she hadn’t just made a horrible suggestion seconds ago. The difference between what she looked like and what went on inside her head was staggering. After a moment, she let out a cheerful “Oh!” and continued, “You should tell him you don’t like him!”

“I should what now?”

“He’ll definitely cry.”

“Cry...”

He would...cry. I couldn’t even picture him crying.

“He will for sure. He loves you, after all, Your Highness.”

“Maria, if Prince Louis told you he didn’t like you, would you cry?”

“Not at all.”

Poor little prince. He should try a little harder to be liked.

I looked at Maria’s confident face, and groaned.

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I mean, why not try, right?

Resolute, I stood before Lord Clarke’s door. We may have been married, but, at my insistence, we still kept separate rooms.

I knocked.

“Yes?”

“It’s me, Leticia.”

The second I uttered my name, I heard the loud sounds of his feet thudding against the floor as he rushed to yank the door open.

“L-Leticia?!” he exclaimed in shock.

“Um, yes,” I replied. It was the first time his reaction had unsettled me a little.

Lord Clarke stared at me for a moment, his cheeks blushing a faint pink. “It, it’s the first time you’ve come to my room...”

“Huh?”

Was it? I couldn’t remember. I tried to recall, and realized that it was true—even back when we were little, I’d never come to his room.

Which reminded me that, since we’d married, I still hadn’t been to his room, but he kept coming to mine. I wished he hadn’t.

Lord Clarke brought a hand to his mouth, quivering. Was he cold?

“Y-You came to my room... I’m so happy...”

Oh. He was trembling with joy.

“Um, may I come in?” I asked. It would’ve been awkward to just leave him shaking at the door.

“Oh, sure,” he replied, guiding me into the room.

The prince prompted me to sit, and I did so without hesitation.

“Did something happen?” he asked, unable to hide his nervousness. Usually he was a little calmer than this, but now his heart was on his sleeve.

“Um, er...”

“Hm?” He wasn’t suppressing a smile like he normally did. He seemed genuinely happy.

“Uh, it’s...”

“Yes?” he asked, tilting his head to the side, still happy as a clam.

“Uhh...”

“Lettie?”

Lord Clarke looked so happy that if he’d had a tail, it would’ve been wagging. My words died in my throat as I pictured him like that.

Now what? I asked myself, stealing a glance at him.

He looked *so happy*.

“You see...”

“Yes?” he repeated. I wished he’d stop smiling so innocently.

“I...”

“You?”

“I don’t...”

“You don’t?”

Stop repeating after me!

“I don’t...like...”

I lifted my head at those words, and noticed his earlier expression shifting to one of despair.

Oh.

Ugh, whatever!

“I don’t, like...*not* like you?”

“Oh, Lettie!”

Dammit!

Immediately, his face lit up, and he beamed widely. I could’ve sworn I really did see a tail wagging behind him.

Dammit!

Accepting defeat, I smiled back at the joyful Lord Clarke.

Outrageous!

“So you’re not marrying Prince Louis, Maria?”

“Of course not.”

Wow. Shot down immediately. Poor Prince Louis.

“He’s cute, he’s rich, he’s devoted. He ticks all the boxes, right?”

“Our age difference is too great.”

I’d figured that was the problem.

Maria, like me, was seventeen. Prince Louis was thirteen. A four-year age gap might not seem like much in the grand scheme of things, but he was *thirteen*. That would’ve been criminal. I wouldn’t have been able to date a boy that age, either. If Lord Clarke had been that age I’d have run away to a neighboring country in a flash.

“If I were to accept His Highness Prince Louis’s proposal now, what would people think of me? I’d be the witch who corrupted a young, innocent boy.”

Well, she had a point. Thirteen was still clearly a child. If a young adult woman married a child...that *would* be what people would think. I agreed.

“Why did Prince Louis propose to you?” I asked.

“I don’t know either,” she explained. “I was only around him for about three months. My family fell into ruin shortly after we met.”

Something had to have happened during those three months. I wanted to ask, but I was scared to. What if it led to *another* endless story?

Still, I asked anyway, and she had no idea. What a mystery.

“If Prince Louis were eighteen and you were twenty-two, it would be more balanced, I think,” I said.

“It would. But twenty-two is past marriageable age...” Maria gazed into the distance. She must’ve had a hunch that she wouldn’t marry in her prime. After all, Prince Louis was doing everything in his power to disrupt her marriage prospects and making sure she wouldn’t meet any other men.

The age factor was probably the reason Prince Louis had plotted to kidnap Maria. Seventeen was indeed the ideal age for marriage.

“I don’t know what to do,” Maria said, seeming truly troubled.

“Poor you,” I offered sympathetically.

“Your Highness...”

“Do you finally understand what I went through?”

“You’re not consoling me at all!” she snapped in frustration, though she still diligently served me tea. How professional!

It was so wonderful to leisurely fish and drink tea in the courtyard. I basked in the warm sunlight as Maria glared at me with what looked like annoyance in her eyes.

“He gave me a negligée,” she said.

“That wasn’t my fault,” I replied.

“It was definitely your fault, Your Highness.”

“What that dumb prince does or doesn’t do isn’t my business.”

“You’re the one who taught him about the existence of negligées, right?”

“I did not teach him anything. I wrapped one around his face.”

“That’s the same thing!”

“I would like you to take one off and wrap it around my face,” Prince Louis said to my handmaiden.

“Where on earth did you come from?!” Maria shrieked at this sudden declaration, backing away.

Seemingly unperturbed, Prince Louis inched closer to her. “You look amazing today as well, Maria,” he said.

“Please stay away from me,” she replied.

“I love all of you, your cold side included.”

“I do not love *you*.”

“That’s all right. My love is enough.”

“You’re not listening!”

Maria took off running, but since she was working, she only ran around the courtyard. How professional!

The pretty little prince cheerfully chased after Maria. With how cute he was, it made for quite the idyllic sight, I thought as I sipped my tea.

A sigh came from behind me. “I want to go home...”

I turned to look, and there stood Lyle.

“You seem wistful,” I said.

“How could I not be?” he replied. “Day after day I’m ordered to find Maria gifts, asked what women like, told to handle correspondence with our home country, and to top it all off, I had to procure a negligée...”

Wow. So much work! The life of an attendant sounded tough. It was a good thing I was a noble lady.

Wasn’t Prince Louis here to study? Was it really okay for him to spend his days chasing after Maria? It was fine, right? It had to be.

“Here. Take one,” I said, taking a cookie from the platter and offering it to Lyle. “It’ll lift your spirits.”

“Thank you,” Lyle murmured, bringing the cookie to his lips. He took one bite, then immediately spat it out, coughing and sputtering.

“I made these to prank Lord Clarke,” I told him. “What do you think?”

“What do I think?!” he snapped. “I think you shouldn’t be using people as test subjects, is what I think!”

“I mean the ultra-spicy cookies. What are your thoughts?”

“They’re way too spicy! They’re disgusting! The worst thing I’ve ever eaten!”

“Yes! They’re perfect, then!”

“Why is everyone horrible to me?!”

I thought I heard Lyle yelling something, but I was preoccupied with other concerns, such as how to get a certain someone to consume my creations.

Then a shadow loomed over me.

“Lettie,” Lord Clarke said, in the voice he normally used when something was wrong.

Slowly, I lifted my head to meet his gaze. “L-Lord Clarke! G-Good day to you!”

“Nothing’s good about it,” he replied.

I knew it. He was mad. But why?

“Lettie,” he repeated.

“Yes?!”

“Didn’t I tell you not to have tea parties with other men?”

Oh! *That.*

Lyle, beet red from the ultra-spicy cookie, seemed to be in a bit of a panic.

“I mean, you know, he just showed up in the middle of it—”

“Lettie,” he said, interrupting my attempt at an excuse, his tone gentle. Gentle, I tell you. *Gentle!* “Come here, would you?”

“Okay...” I said, unable to do anything but comply.

As he led me away, I saw Lyle looking at me, vindicated. Jerk!

Just you wait. I’ll feed you an extra-sour cookie next time!

First Date

Suddenly, I'd managed to escape.

It'd been so easy! What a letdown. But I'd taken the chance, and now I was at the town outside the palace.

It was my first time exploring it. There were so many stalls. So many shops. So many people!

Excited by this new experience, I wandered around. The streets were so lively! Just looking at them made me happy.

"I'd like this one, please, sir!"

"Here ya go!"

I purchased some candy art from a stall. This was my first time shopping, but I had a basic idea of how to go about it. I paid what the merchant asked, and got my candy.

It was so sparkly and glittery, yet so cheap. He should've been charging more, I thought.

Despite feeling like it was a waste, I licked the candy. It was so sweet! Commoner treats were so sweet! The sweetness was so different from the kind of thing I was used to eating.

"Miss," came a voice from behind me as I enjoyed my candy. "Would you care for some tea?"

A hand was held out to me.

This had to be one of those infamous pick-up artists I'd heard so much about!

I looked up at my suitor’s face, intending to glare, but my expression quickly turned to shock instead.

“Lord Clarke?”

“Correct.”

Well, yeah. Of course I could recognize him. He might’ve been dressed like a commoner, but I saw his face every day.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

“I thought you might get bored of me just catching you the same old way all the time.”

You know, I’d been wondering why he seemed to do these weird things, thinking I’d grow bored of him. It’s not like escaping was a hobby of mine. I *actually* wanted to run away.

“You don’t need to roleplay like that,” I told him.

“I see.” He looked dejected.

His outfit was so different from usual. He looked like a nice, working-class young man out and about in town. In these new clothes, the air around him was different, and I couldn’t help but stare. Handsome men looked good in anything! What a great deal.

“Lettie.”

Crap. I’d stared too long!

I gasped, averting my gaze. Nope. Nope. I’d nearly made him happy again for no reason.

After a moment, I stole a glance up at him, and he offered me a soft smile.

“Since we’re already here, how about a date?” he asked.

“A date?”

“That’s what I was hoping for when I let you escape today, actually.”

Oh. So it *had* been on purpose.

It made sense. I’d managed to get away far too easily. Why else would the soldiers have intentionally looked the other way?

“By ‘date,’ do you mean, like, when you go out with someone of the opposite sex and do all sorts of things together? That kind of date?”

“You’re well-informed.”

“A date...”

I thought back on the dates described in the romance novels I’d been sneakily reading lately. A man and a woman would frolic about the city, hand in hand, and at the end...they’d kiss.

“W-We must not be indecent in a public place!” I exclaimed, turning beet red.

“What?” Lord Clarke replied, puzzled.

“I mean, dates are major plot points in the stories!”

“Leticia, what have you been reading?”

“I can’t do it!”

“Calm down.”

I fussed and flailed about as Lord Clarke calmly explained things to me.

“Listen,” he said. “Those are only stories. Things like that hardly ever happen in reality.”

“But the kissing!”

“That’s for the sake of storytelling. If real life were the same way, everyone around us would be kissing, no?”

“True...”

“Those are stories. This is reality.”

“Right.”

“So let’s have a walk around town and have some fun.”

“Okay!”

Well, that was fine, then! I wanted to see the sights! How exciting!

At my sudden change in mood, Lord Clarke smiled.

“Oh, by the way, Lettie...”

“Yes?”

“Why were you reading *that* kind of story?”

I froze. My mouth opened and closed.

Lord Clarke continued to press for answers. “I thought you said you hated reading that sort of thing. Are you suddenly interested in romance?”

“N-N-N-No? No!” I stammered, denying it in a hurry. “I-I-I-I-I just had some free time, and the books were there in my room, I thought, you know, I’d read some! But that doesn’t mean I’m interested in romance or anything!”

Lord Clarke petted my head as I desperately tried to come up with an excuse.

“Good,” he said. “I’m glad.”

“Were you listening to me?”

“You’ve finally taken an interest in romance.”

“You weren’t!”

How frustrating! I was over here, trying to explain yet again that he had the wrong idea, and he just brushed me aside!

“Now, my cute Lettie...”

“Please stop it with the sap.”

“My lovely wife.”

“Seriously, just stop.”

I knew I was getting redder and redder. And I knew he was having fun seeing me in this state. One day I was going to be thick-skinned enough that I could take anything he said to me. One day!

“Let’s have ourselves a fun date,” he said.

I could agree with that, at least, and so I took his hand.

***

“There’s a festival being held today that only happens once a year.”

Oh. Was that why there were stalls everywhere? I took in his words as I looked around. *What to eat next?*

“Lettie,” Lord Clarke called out, his grip on my hand tightening slightly. “I’ve actually never been to the city, so I’m not sure how to shop for things.”

No way.

Or so I thought, but looking at his face, he didn’t seem like he was lying at all.

It made sense, I supposed. He was royalty, raised at the palace with a silver spoon in his mouth. He'd never had a need to go shopping on his own.

Well, granted, today was also *my* first time going shopping on my own.

Lord Clarke was fidgeting. I followed his gaze to a nearby shop that advertised freshly squeezed juice.

"Do you want to try some?" I asked.

"I've never tried anything like it."

"Oh, true."

Seeing him so fidgety felt awkward. I explained to him how shops worked.

"Did you get all that?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Now, use this to buy some."

"You can buy some with this tiny coin?" Lord Clarke asked, gazing intently at the coin I gave him. He'd never touched money before, and seemed very moved. He curled his fingers around the coin, and walked to the store with purpose.

He began speaking with the clerk once he arrived there, a little panicked. Apparently, there were simply too many kinds of juice. He should've asked what the clerk recommended!

I watched over him restlessly, like a mother watching her child take on a challenge for the first time. *I believe in you, my son!*

Finally, he made his choice, took his juice from the clerk with a smile, and returned, grinning ear to ear.

“I did it!”

First errand: success.

He looked so proud. I thought it was kind of cute. Maybe I still had the rose-tinted glasses of motherhood on. I was overflowing with motherly instinct.

“Good job,” I said.

Pleased with my words, he took a sip of his drink.

“I’ve never tasted anything like this! It’s quite good,” he said, seeming to enjoy it. “Now that I know how to buy things, we should come to town together more often.”

“You shouldn’t sneak out so often,” I chided him.

“It’s okay, as long as no one notices.”

“People will notice! It’d be very bad if they didn’t, actually!”

If the guards kept looking the other way when the people they were supposed to protect snuck out, it’d be gross professional negligence on their part!

“Then we’ll inform them that we’re going out,” he said.

“No! Stop! That’d just cause a huge ruckus!”

“But the guards *were* informed today. In fact, they’re close by, just in case.”

“Huh?”

They were? I had no idea.

“They’re in disguise, you see. Having people in armor around would ruin our date.”

“Oh...”

“So we can go on dates anytime!”

“I don’t really want to go on dates,” I told him honestly.

He just kept grinning at me. What was he trying to tell me? “Yes,” he said. “Let’s come again sometime.”

“I just said I don’t want to.”

“A great plan.”

“What part of ‘I don’t want to’ did you miss?!”

He completely ignored me, grinning widely. He was just hearing whatever he wanted to hear! I’d said I didn’t want to go on dates!

I fanned myself, trying to calm my reddening cheeks, which really needed to stop reacting to the word ‘date.’

“Here, Lettie. Have some,” he said, holding out the juice he’d bought earlier to me.

“Oh. Thanks!”

You know, I *was* getting pretty thirsty, so that was nice. It tasted refreshing, a nice mix of sweet and tart. I wondered what fruit they’d used.

As I slurped, I noticed Lord Clarke’s cheeks turning pink. Why?

His face still flushed, he stared at me.

“That was an indirect kiss...”

“Pffft?!” I couldn’t stop myself from sputtering. “What? An indirect— What are you making me do?!”

“No, I mean, I didn’t realize when I handed it to you...”

“Stop making that face!”

“Sorry, smiles come naturally to me.”

“You stop it right now!” I demanded emphatically.

He was still beaming. “I think I’ll keep this straw as a memento.”

“Don’t!” I snapped, trying to snatch the straw from him. It didn’t work, and he held it like it was precious.

“It seems unfair that you don’t get a memento too.”

“Then don’t make that thing into one!” I protested to deaf ears.

After tucking the straw into his pocket, Lord Clarke took me by the hand and walked into a store.

Ooh! A souvenir shop for commoners!

I’d never seen any trinkets like these. How exciting! They were all so pretty and sparkly! And affordable! Wow! Ordinary shops were so great.

“Lettie,” Lord Clarke called out to me as I browsed the brooches.

He handed me a bag. When had he bought this? What speed!

After we left the store, I opened the bag.

“A music box!” And beautifully crafted too.

“Given your status, you wouldn’t be able to wear the ornaments they sell here, even if I bought them for you,” he explained. “You like this kind of thing, don’t you?”

I do! Very much so.

Why did he have to know me so well? How irritating.

“Thank you,” I said with a smile, making Lord Clarke’s cheeks flush a little.

Later, the prince proudly displayed the straw in his room. I wished he’d throw it away.

Maid Outfits Are Romantic, They Say

“They say maids are romantic.”

I cast Brie, who’d just showed up out of nowhere to spout nonsense, a suspicious look.

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to say, but I’m sure it’s nothing good,” I said.

“What do you mean, ‘nothing good’?!” Brie demanded, indignantly. As if I cared.

“What do you want?”

“Oho, I’m so glad you asked!” she exclaimed, pulling something out of the paper bag she’d brought, as if she’d been waiting for this moment. “It’s a maid uniform! I put my whole heart into sewing it for you!”

Proudly, she unfurled an impressive maid outfit—*not*. Well, *yes*, it *was* a maid outfit, but not what I knew as a *proper* one. It certainly looked entirely different from the uniform Maria wore as a handmaiden.

“Why is the hem so short?” I demanded.

“It’s much better that way,” said Brie.

“Why? Isn’t it embarrassing for the legs to be on full display?”

“On the contrary! It simply would not do for it to be too long.”

“But how’s a maid supposed to work in this?”

“Oh, no, no, don’t worry! One’s not supposed to wear this to work as a maid.”

The more she said, the less I understood. Maria, who had been standing nearby, also tilted her head.

“It’s a maid outfit, but not for maids to work in?” she asked.

“Correct.”

“Why?”

Brie huffed, very pleased with herself. “Because this outfit is filled to the brim with men’s romantic fantasies!”

Maria and I recoiled at Brie’s self-assured statement. We recoiled a *lot*. Figuratively and literally. As we backed away, Brie slowly crept toward us.

“*That’s* what you meant by ‘romantic’?!” I asked, aghast. “Just what is it you’ve brought me?!”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from someone who purchased a negligée!” Brie retorted. “Don’t play innocent, now!”

“I didn’t buy that for *me* to wear!”

“And I made a tidy profit! But now that Your Highnesses have stopped buying them, I need a new source of income!”

“That’s not my problem! I’m not buying this!”

“Please, pleeease! Are we not friends?”

“Bat your eyelashes all you want, I’m not going to purcheese it! I mean, purchase it!”

Brie dropped her act, clicking her tongue. What a grating woman! “I can at least turn *some* profit if you buy it!”

“Do I look like I care?! Ask Maria to buy it!”

“Huh?!” Maria, who had up until now tried to quietly stay out of it, gasped in shock. I wasn’t about to let her walk out of this unscathed. “Why me?!”

“Just make your obsessive stalker buy it for you!”

“Eek! Don’t say such terrifying things!” she protested, rubbing her goosebump-covered arms. She must’ve been really horrified! Maria then turned to Brie, and asked, “Wh-Why don’t you just put it on for now so we can see what it looks like?”

Maria was so adamantly against the entirely-too-young prince buying the outfit that she would make this suggestion, even while she was actively trembling in fear. Wow.

However, Brie faltered at the idea.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You were trying to make *us* wear it, but *you* wouldn’t do it?”

“I mean...it’s not meant for *me* to wear...”

“It’s not meant for us, either!” Maria protested with tears in her eyes.

Brie was at a loss for words.

“Just wear it so we can see, and we’ll consider buying it,” I suggested.

“I mean... Look, see... Wouldn’t it expose my legs a little too much?”

“That’s rich coming from someone who sold negligées!” Maria exclaimed.

You know, she *had* a point.

Brie groaned loudly. “Fine, fine! I’ll wear it! That’s what you want me to do, yes?!” she shouted, desperate, as she began to undress.

Wow, she was actually going to wear it! What guts! I might have egged her on, but I didn't *actually* think she was going to do it.

Maria helped Brie change. Once she was done, she stood proudly in front of us, puffing out her chest. It jiggled. That had to have been on purpose.

"How's that?!"

I scrutinized her. "It's...a little tight on you."

"I-I mean, it's in *your* size, so what am I supposed to do about it?!" she protested sharply.

Honestly, the maid outfit was too cute, too frilly, and too short for Brie, and didn't suit her as well as I'd expected. Her figure was simply too shapely. It was more like the outfit was wearing her, instead.

But the sight of her voluptuous figure squished into the too-small outfit was certain to appeal to a subset of enthusiasts.

"It doesn't suit you," I said.

"It doesn't," Maria agreed at the same time.

"I-I wanted to be the kind of girl that can rock a cute look..." Brie whined as she began to cry. Had we accidentally touched a nerve?

"I-It's okay! You have such great boobs!"

"I didn't want to have huge boobs..."

"But having a figure that goes *boing-shwp-boing* is, like, the envy of all women!"

"I'd rather have been born cute..."

There was no getting through to her. Brie kept weeping, very uncharacteristically. Indeed, a curvy woman like her wasn't a good match

for cute clothes. Her range of outfit options was quite limited.

“I-I’ll buy it!” I exclaimed reluctantly. I couldn’t simply have her cry forever!

Immediately, a wide grin spread across Brie’s face. “Thank you for your patronage!”

What a sharp businesswoman she was.

Ignoring my twitching face, Brie quickly went about taking off the maid outfit and changing back into her dress.

“Would you like to try it on?” she asked. “It would be a problem if the size was wrong.”

“No, I mean... I’m not actually going to wear it...”

“Aw, come on now! Don’t say that!” She’d been crying until moments ago, and now she was back in full business mode.

Maria deftly went about undoing the straps of my dress. Wait a second! Hadn’t I *just* said I wasn’t going to wear it?!

I made it a point to show my disapproval as I watched my dress unceremoniously come off, but it was two against one. My defeat was all but assured.

Soon I was made to wear the outfit. With my legs on full display, I pushed down on the hem of the skirt, trembling in shame.

“It looks so good on Your Highness!” Maria chirped.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Brie agreed. “Not bad, not bad.”.

Their praise brought me no joy.

“I get it already... I’ll buy one, so let me take this off...”

“Oh, what a waste,” Maria grumbled—but a moment later, her frown turned into a grin.

As I wondered why exactly that was, a voice echoed from across the room.

“Name your price. I’ll take ten.”

“Thank you so much for your purchase!” Brie exclaimed.

Reluctantly, I turned around to look at the source of the voice.

Needless to say, it was exactly who you’d expect. I shrieked.

I Can’t Offer Dating Advice

“I wanna go on a date.”

The little prince, who had dropped by unannounced for a surprise visit, suddenly uttered those words with a completely straight face.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, Prince Louis,” I replied politely, “but you’re not my type at all.”

“As if I’d want *you*, you monkey.”

“Excuse me?! You can’t just say that!”

“I’m well aware that you have a habit of descending from trees!”

“I. Descend. Gracefully!”

“It’s not a matter of grace, you mountain ape!”

“Eeeee!” I screeched, about to pounce on Prince Louis with my mountainous, simian roar, when Lyle stopped me. “Eeeee! Let go of me, Lyle!”

“Now, now, Lady Leticia. Please calm down. There, there.”

“Eeeee! Don’t treat me like a monkey!” I shrieked, yanking at Lyle’s hair for adding fuel to the fire.

I felt like he might’ve screamed in pain, repeatedly, but perhaps I was imagining things. His roots needed doing, anyway. I was being generous by getting rid of them.

Once I had calmed down a bit, I turned to face Prince Louis, who was sprawled in his seat like he owned the place.

“So, what’s this about a date?” I asked.

“I said I want to go on one.”

“And I said no thanks.”

“I know you know what I mean!” he replied indignantly, his cheeks turning red.

“I have no reason to listen to someone who treats people like monkeys.”

“You went on a date with Prince Clarke the other day. I know you did!”

“Listen when people are speaking to you!”

“I wanna go on a date too.”

“Go back to your country and you can do whatever you want!”

“I. Want. To. Go. On. A. Date. Here. In. This. Country. With. Maria!”

“Don’t pause after every single word!”

“Date with Maria!”

“Don’t just state the main point!”

“So I need your help, monkey!”

“Eeeee!”

Once again, I roared. Once again, Lyle grabbed hold of my arms. Once again, I unceremoniously yanked out his hair. Hmph! He could go bald for all I cared!

“What is it you want me to do, exactly?”

“I want you to tell me how to go on a date.”

“I have no idea.”

“You just went on one the other day!”

“I did not! It was an outing!”

“That’s what a date is!”

“No! An outing is an outing!”

What an irritating, stubborn child, telling me it’d been a date when I’d already said it wasn’t! No wonder Maria wanted nothing to do with this ankle-biter!

Lyle looked at me like he wanted to say something. What?! What was it?! If he didn’t watch what he said, I’d pull out more of his hair!

“Sure, whatever,” the prince said. “So teach me how to go on an outing.”

“I don’t know what there is to teach. I just went for a stroll around the castle town.”

Prince Louis let out a heavy, disappointed sigh. “Wow, you’re useless.”

“What?! Say that again, I dare you!”

“Useless!”

“Eeeee!”

This time, Lyle didn’t stop me. Since the prince was a royal, I refrained from yanking out his hair, and just pinched his cheeks lightly instead. Lightly, I tell you! He had no reason to make a fuss about it. This was why I hated spoiled brats!

“A classic date just involves wandering around town!” I yelled at him.

“What?! That’s it?!”

“That’s just the basics! And then you stop by some store and buy them a gift!”

“That’s all?!”

“It’s difficult precisely because it’s so simple! If you’re so sure you can pull it off, then go right ahead!”

“All right!” Prince Louis exclaimed, beaming adorably in an age-appropriate fashion as he turned to Maria, who was pouring tea next to him. “Maria, we’re going out!”

He took her hand in his and gazed into her eyes, making color rise to her cheeks.

“There’s much I would like to say, such as ‘Why do I have to go?’ and ‘Why won’t you consider my circumstances?’ and ‘I’m working right now,’ but most of all—don’t ask for dating advice in front of the person you want to take on a date!” Maria yelled, her voice reverberating across the room.

Peaceful Days

“The crown princess has escaped!”

“Your Highneeesss!”

Ah. Another lively day at the palace, I thought as I picked out my dress for tonight’s soiree. It was quite the hassle to find one I hadn’t worn yet that would suit my mistress.

Lady Leticia, the daughter of a duke, was the young woman I served. I’d been caring for her ever since she was a little girl.

Thanks to Lord Nadir’s machinations, I was kept apart from Lady Leticia for some time, but His Highness Prince Clarke had arranged for me to stay in this palace as her handmaiden even after her marriage to him.

“Have you found her?!”

“She’s not here!”

“Where has she run off to today?!”

I smiled. It would seem the mistress was on the run today yet again. This scene had become quite commonplace.

Before marriage, she’d always had the habit of trying to escape, and that goal had often dictated her actions. The habit had never gone away, even after the wedding. As soon as she found an opening, she would merrily run off.

I felt sorry for the poor soldiers who had to search for her, but I did also think this was good exercise for them during such peaceful times as these.

Perhaps pink for today.

With my chosen dress in hand, I now needed accessories. As I went to the corner of the dressing room where they were kept, I spotted the familiar head of a certain someone, who was crawling on all fours.

“Lady Leticia?” I called out.

“Hyah!” she yelped, jumping in surprise. “Gosh, Lily! Don’t scare me like that!”

That was my line. “My lady, what are you doing?”

“It should be somewhere around here!”

“What should?”

“A secret passage.”

Oh dear.

“That’s weird. I *know* it was marked on this castle’s top-secret blueprint!”

“And just where is it that you found such a thing?”

“Hee hee!” she chuckled, puffing up her chest. “I found many things over those ten years, I’ll have you know!”

That was not something to brag about.

“Lady Leticia, there *is* such a thing as excessive tomfoolery.”

“It’s for my freedom, okay?!”

“You have quite a bit of freedom now, do you not?”

“That’s not what this is about!” Lady Leticia exclaimed, shaking her fist. “It *is* true that my princess lessons are over. I mean, I’m already a princess! I’m now putting it all into practice. And, well, there aren’t quite as many balls, and I don’t have much official business to tend to, so I spend my days

busy with fishing and climbing trees and napping and so on, *gracefully* might I add, but still! This is a separate issue! Okay?!”

I nodded, and she seemed satisfied. Well, I did suppose she didn’t have much privacy, and therefore did not feel truly free.

“Still! With my constant escapes, my reputation must’ve taken a hit!” she said optimistically. “Maybe it could lead to a scandal ending in divorce!”

“I doubt as much,” I replied immediately. Lady Leticia puffed her cheeks out.

She thought her reputation had taken a hit, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Lady Leticia performed her official duties in exemplary fashion and her conduct was flawless. Her ten years of princess lessons hadn’t been for nothing—she was only mischievous within the castle. And yes, she did have a habit of escaping, and spent her days in a leisurely fashion, occasionally sharing the fish she’d catch with the soldiers, but nonetheless...

She was originally known to the people as the future crown princess, and due to her diligence, she commanded a lot of trust among them. They’d had no complaints. Not only that; thanks to Miss Brianna, word had spread about how harsh her princess lessons had been, and how wonderful Lady Leticia was for having endured it, further increasing the numbers of her supporters.

Her reputation was, in fact, soaring. She was so well-liked that her habit of attempting escape wasn’t an issue at all.

Completely unaware of all this, however, Lady Leticia seemed dissatisfied. Still, as someone who had known her for a long time, I was aware that she didn’t truly wish for divorce.

“Ugh, I can’t find the passage,” she said. “Maybe I should crack the floor open.”

“Please do not say such terrifying things.” Damaging the royal palace? What a frightening thought.

“Oh, you’d be surprised how often things are hidden beneath the floor like this! Ooh, I’m excited now! Cracking the floor open it is!” she said with sparkles in her eyes.

“Please don’t.”Sparkly eyes or no, I simply could not allow this!

“Lettie?” came a voice from behind me.

Lady Leticia began to tremble. “L-Lord Clarke? Good day to you...”

“Say, Lettie, I hear you ran away again.”

“Oh! Perish the thought! I was but conversing with Lily.”

“About finding a secret passage out of here?”

Oh my. He knows.

Lady Leticia’s face went pale.

“You think I don’t know everything you know?” the prince asked with a terrifying chuckle.

Perhaps I should leave before I take collateral damage.

“I’ll be excusing myself, Lady Leticia,” I said, taking a number of accessories and stepping out of the dressing room.

“Nooo! Don’t leave meee!” I thought I heard her cry out in despair.

Perhaps I’d imagined it.

I decided to simply pull myself together and prepare for tonight’s soiree.

Appendix: Meeting the Prince

“‘Betrothal’?”

I had no idea what that word meant, so I repeated it to my father. He was crying a lot. My mother was smiling. After hearing the word, my brother had gone off somewhere, saying he had things to do.

For a while, I just sat there, watching my father cry and my mother grin. Neither of them were stopping, so I repeated my question.

“What’s a ‘betrothal’?”

My father didn’t answer, just went from crying a lot to sobbing a lot.

My mother just kept smiling. “It means promising to marry someone,” she answered instead.

Oh! Marry! I knew *that* word!

“I’m going to be a bride!” I said.

Just about a month ago, my parents had taken me somewhere. Um, some man, Count Whatshisface, was getting married. And a lady had walked into the church wearing this pretty white dress, and smiled at the man next to her the whole time. It was really beautiful!

“I get to wear that dress!”

I was excited! But my mother told me to calm down. “It’s not going to happen right away. You need to grow up a bit more first,” she explained.

“Whaaat?”

I wanted to wear it right away, though!

As I sulked, my mother patted my head.

“It’s too early for marriage... Too early for a betrothal...” my father mumbled through his sobs.

My mother totally ignored him. And if she was doing that, it meant I had to leave him be too. So I ignored my crying father, and enjoyed my mother’s head pats.

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They’d told me I was going to meet my fiancé today.

“Is my fiancé inside the palace?” I asked my father.

He nodded. “Yes. Well, rather, he lives there,” he explained. His eyes were red and swollen from all the crying. It looked very bad.

I’d been to the royal palace a bunch of times. Usually, I went to the courtyard, but today my father said I was going inside with him. Normally he told me me I’d get in the way of his job if I stayed inside, so it wasn’t okay, but I guess today was okay.

I’d never been very deep into the palace, so I was nervous. Walking around this place made me feel like an adventurer on a journey.

“You need to be a good girl now, okay?” my father said as we stopped in front of the largest doors I’d ever seen. We were deep inside the palace now.

I nodded obediently, and my father cried a little more.

“Oh, you’re such a good girl,” he wailed. “And you’re only seven...”

“Father, hurry up!”

“Oh, my daughter’s so heartless...” he said between sobs. He looked kind of pitiful wiping his tears. Even a kid like me could tell.

I’d overheard that my brother, who was still young too, had been doing most of our father’s work. I could imagine my father being slowly pushed to the side by his son. Poor father.

I couldn’t reach his shoulder to pat it, so I just grabbed his leg instead. He covered his mouth when he saw me.

“Oh, my daughter’s so cute...”

“Father, hurry up!”

“Oh, my daughter’s so stern...”

He was sniffling when he announced himself to the soldier standing next to the giant doors.

The soldier opened them slowly. Behind the doors, I saw a kind of chubby man, a charming lady I’d never seen before, and a cute boy around my age. He looked a little like a doll.

“Your Majesty,” my father said. “I thank you for inviting us here today...”

“There’s no need to be so formal,” the chubby man replied. “We shall soon be family, after all.”

With a smile, “Your Majesty” waved his hand at me to come over. I obediently went to him.

“Oh ho. What a lovely girl. My son certainly is discerning,” he said, patting my head and laughing. I wondered what “discerning” meant.

The lady next to Your Majesty chuckled. “Oh my! How precious! I’ve always wanted a daughter like her,” she said as she lifted me up. “Oh dear, they’re already so heavy at this age!”

“I-I’m not heavy!” I protested.

“Oh dear! You’re upset I called you heavy? You certainly are a proper little lady,” she said with another chuckle as she put me down. “Come now, little Lettie. The person you’re supposed to meet is over here.”

She pushed my back gently toward the beautiful boy I’d seen when the doors opened.

“H-He’s a doll...”

“Huh?”

“The doll spoke!” I exclaimed.

It was so surprising that I hugged my father’s leg again. He panicked, and Your Majesty and the lady started laughing a lot.

“Isn’t that nice, Clarke?” the lady said. “She thinks you look like a doll!”

“Mother, that’s not exactly a compliment for a boy,” the doll-like boy replied.

“Oh dear. How picky you are.”

“She thought you were pretty,” Your Majesty said. “You should be happy, don’t you think?”

Your Majesty and the lady looked at one another like, “Right?” The child made a face I wasn’t sure how to describe.

Slowly, he turned away from them and toward me. I was still hugging my father’s leg as he held out his hand.

“I’m Clarke. Your fiancé, Lettie.”

“Clarke,” I repeated. It didn’t sound right. “Fiancé.”

My father encouraged me to take his hand, so I did. I knew what to do in this kind of situation! I was supposed to introduce myself!

“Lord Clarke!” I said, grinning. “I’m Leticia Dorman!”

The doll-like boy blushed. The adults all had different reactions.

“Oh my!” the lady said.

“Oh ho,” Your Majesty said.

“Urk... *Sniff*...” my father said.

“Father, am I going to marry him?” I asked.

“Y-Yes. You will,” he replied.

“I’m going to marry this handsome boy! Yaaay!”

“H-Handsome?” the boy repeated.

“You’re very handsome, Lord Clarke!” I said, holding his hand.

His face turned even more red, and his eyes got a little wet.

“Oh, the innocence,” the lady said. “Ah, yes! Would you like to see our flower garden in the courtyard, little Lettie? It’s the best time of the year for it.”

“A flower garden! I wanna see!”

The beautiful lady smiled widely at my reply, said something to one of the soldiers, and started walking. Everyone followed, and I did too.

We all arrived at the same courtyard I knew well.

“Wow!” I said, looking at all the flowers blooming everywhere.

“They’re not quite as extravagant as roses, but I figured you would like these, so I let them grow as-is,” the lady said.

“Yay! Flowers!”

Little flowers were sprouting from the ground and spreading all around me. They were beautiful. I was so excited. I ran to the middle of the flower field and sat down. Lord Clarke took a seat next to me and smiled, so I smiled back, and he blushed again. Maybe he was feeling hot?

“Well look at you, sitting together like two little lovebirds,” the pretty lady said with a cheery laugh.

“You two have fun, little ones,” Your Majesty said.

“Oh, it’s far too early to leave them alone like this!” my father whined.

“Hurry along, now,” the pretty lady said as she dragged my father away.

After I’d waved goodbye to him, I started picking flowers.

“What are you doing?” Lord Clarke asked.

“I’m making a flower crown!” I told him. “I read about it in a book!”

“I see...”

One by one, I began tying the flowers together.

“Huh?”

My flower crown didn’t turn out very much like a flower crown. It was more like a sad, droopy ring. It was already falling apart in places, too...

“I messed up...”

The book had lied to me! I was so sad my eyes filled with tears.

“Wah...” I began to cry.

“Lettie,” Lord Clarke said.

“Wah?”

He put something soft on my head, and I reached up to touch it.

“It’s a flower crown!” I said excitedly as I held it up.

The one I’d made was all messy and came undone, but this one was a perfect circle!

“Thank you!”

Lord Clarke looked down and turned super red. I was so happy I put a flower in his hair! Then he made a strange face. Did boys not like flowers?

“Lord Clarke!”

“Yes, Lettie?”

“I love you!” I said, and I gave him a little kiss on the cheek.

Lord Clarke fell on his back.

“Lord Clarke? Lord Clarke?!” I called out, panicking. I began to shake him, but he stopped me.

“Lettie, where did you learn to do that?”

“Someone did this to a prince in a storybook!”

“Well, don’t do that to other people in the future, okay?”

“Um, okay?” I wasn’t sure why, but I agreed anyway.

He got up and smiled. I was so happy I had to hug him, and he hugged me back.

“My goodness, how adorable! Someone fetch the royal painter immediately!” the lady said.

“Oh, it’s far too early for her to be kissing his cheek!” my father whined.

“A man must know when to resign himself to his fate,” Your Majesty said.

The hug was nice, and I was happy, but the grown-ups kind of ruined it.

***

I’d had a really nice day! And a really nice night! And now it was the next day.

“Lettie, you’ll be starting your princess education today,” my father told me. He looked sad.

“What’s an ‘education’?” I asked him.

“It’s lessons,” he explained. “You’ll be studying to be a bride.”

“Like, um, how to be a homemaker?”

“Oh, so you know that word,” my father said, staring into the distance. “Right, so, about that education...”

“Hmm?”

“You’ll be the wife of a king someday, so you have to learn lots of things.”

“Okay?”

“Oh. You don’t understand, do you?” my father asked, trying to think of how to explain it. “Well, either way, I think it’s far too soon to start your princess lessons, so don’t worry. I’ll tell them no.”

A third person entered the conversation. “You can’t.”

“Nadir!” my father said, very surprised by the sudden appearance of my brother, who hadn’t been home since yesterday.

“Leticia *will* begin her education today. Arrangements have already been made.”

“You’ve gone behind my back again!”

“I only did what was proper. Now, father, kindly return to our territory.”

“Wh-What are you saying?! I’m staying here!”

“His Majesty has decreed that I handle affairs at the capital and you handle affairs in our territory. Now, please, father, go on home.”

“Nadir!”

“The carriage is ready and waiting for you. Go.”

“N-No! I’m not leaving Lettie!”

“Don’t be stubborn!”

“You monster!”

As my brother dragged him away, my father yelled my name. Apparently I wasn’t going home, so I waved goodbye. He yelled for me harder.

My brother shoved our father into the carriage, then turned back towards me.

“Is father going back to our territory?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Don’t I have to go back?”

“You have work to do.”

“What work?”

My brother grinned at me. “Shall we head to the palace?”

***

I’d just been to the palace yesterday, but now we were heading there again. This time, it wasn’t my father holding my hand. It was my brother.

“Are we going to see Lord Clarke?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. At the end.”

At the end?

I was confused, but I was also really happy because I’d get to see Lord Clarke.

My brother pulled me to a small door, different from the one I’d seen yesterday.

“Is this where Lord Clarke is?” I asked.

“No, it isn’t.”

I tilted my head. Hadn’t we come here to see Lord Clarke?

“Listen, Leticia,” my brother said. “This is something you need to do. The sooner you start, the better.”

“Okay?”

“Even if it gets tough, you need to get through this. You understand, right, Leticia?”

“Okay...”

“If you run away, it’ll only get worse. Okay, Leticia?”

“O-Okay.”

He was just saying the same thing over and over.

“Now work hard,” he said as he opened the door. He stood right where he was, which meant I had to go in alone.

I nervously made my way inside. The door closed behind me, and I heard the sound of the lock clicking. I couldn’t get out through there anymore.

Scared and trembling, I wondered what would happen next. I lifted my head, and in front of me stood a tall woman wearing glasses. She bowed when she saw me.

“Lady Leticia, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am called Laila, and starting today, I am to be your tutor.”

“U-Um, I’m Leticia.” I returned her greeting nervously, and she pushed her glasses back up.

“That’s not right!”

“What?”

“Greetings are the most basic of basics! You must state all the necessary details clearly, and keep the correct posture!”

“Huh?”

“Now try again! Repeat after me! ‘I am Duchess Leticia of House Dorman.’ Say it!”

“I-I am Duchess Leticia of House Dorman.”

“Too quiet, too timid! That’s not good enough! Again!”

“Eep...”

“Do not make ridiculous noises!”

“O-Okaaay...”

“Do not draw out your words! Enunciate properly!”

“Wahhhh...”

“Do not cry!”

I didn’t know why I was there, and I didn’t know why this stranger was yelling at me. I was scared and confused. I cried and cried.

***

It had been a dream.

I’d woken up in my bed, trying to sort out my scrambled thoughts.

It’s okay. I’m Leticia Dorman, seventeen. Yes. Not seven.

I double-checked that it had, indeed, been a dream. But still, hadn’t everything in that dream been something that actually happened in reality?

Yeah, it had, right? It matched the old story the queen had told me. She’d embellished it a little, so it wasn’t an exact match, but I was sure that what I’d seen in the dream was what had actually happened.

I, uh, had kissed the prince on the cheek, while all the adults watched.

Oh! The embarrassment! And I’d blurted out that I loved him! Embarrassing! Mortifying!

I was so ashamed that I rolled around in bed. Then I bumped into something at the edge of the bed, and immediately stopped rolling around.

Slowly, I pushed myself up.

“Lettie! Good morning.”

It was Lord Clarke.

“E-Eek!” I shrieked, throwing my pillow at him. He caught it easily. “Wh-Why are you here?!”

“Maria said that you weren’t waking up, and she was worried about you. You were mumbling in your sleep, so I came to check on you. Were you having a nightmare?” he asked, peering into my face.

Reflexively, I backed away. “Um, it wasn’t so much a bad dream as...”

“Yes?”

While he waited for my answer, I looked at Lord Clarke, and saw the reflection of the boy from my dream.

I’d kissed him. On the cheek.

“Urk...”

As I stared at his cheek, a puzzled Lord Clarke spoke up. “Lettie?”

“It...”

“It?”

“It wasn’t a bad dream! It was so embarrassing I want to die!”

I took off running.

“Lettie?!” Lord Clarke exclaimed in shock.

I wasn’t stopping, though. I mean, come on! Why would my brain do this?! Why make me remember *that* part of the dream?!

Covering my reddened face, I ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

It was only a while later that I heard Lord Clarke’s voice behind me, calling, “You’re still in your nightgown! Leticia! Your clothes!”

Appendix: Lord Clarke, Not “Your Highness”

Apparently, you had to call a prince “Your Highness.”

When I’d first heard about this at the palace, I’d smiled politely at my tutor, wondering why the heck nobody had told me this sooner.

We’d been engaged for a year already! Why was I only learning this now?! Wasn’t it way too late for that?

“You’re still little, so even if you’ve been calling him by name, everyone’s just let it slide,” my brother told me when I ranted to him about it. He’d been living with me at the estate in the capital.

So the adults had to be proper and say “Your Highness,” but kids could just get away with using “Lord” in front of the name.

“But if your tutor said so, you should start calling him Your Highness starting tomorrow,” Nadir added, without taking his eyes off his papers. He wasn’t interested in me at all!

How mean! We were siblings, living away from our parents! Why was he like this?! Why didn’t he want to hang out with me?! Coward!

I was mad, so I puffed up my cheeks and stomped on his foot as he sat on the sofa looking at his paperwork.

“Oww!” he yelped.

“Hmph! Stupid brother!” I said.

“I find it extremely unpleasant when you call me ‘stupid’!” he complained, finally putting his papers down on the table and turning to look at me.

I smiled triumphantly. He must not have liked that, because he started shouting.

“Lily! Come here!” he called out.

“Wow! That’s not fair!” I protested.

“Did you call for me, young master?” Lily asked.

“That was fast!” I exclaimed.

He’d only just called for her and she’d arrived immediately, but Lily wasn’t out of breath at all. Sometimes I wondered if she was one of those mechanical, wind-up dolls.

My brother looked at Lily and said, “Leticia stomped my foot. It would appear she’s still quite far from becoming a proper lady.”

“Oh dear,” Lily replied, turning her gaze to me as I crept toward the door. I froze in place.

“That’s not true,” I said. “I *accidentally* stepped on his foot!”

“Do not lie!” my brother snapped.

“You believe me, right, Lily?” I pleaded, clasping my hands together to my chest and trying my best to make myself look as small as possible.

Lily kept looking at Nadir, then at me, then back at him, then sighed.

“I see,” she said.

My face lit up. Yeah! Lily was *my* handmaiden!

“Perhaps I shall also work on the young lady’s habit of telling lies,” Lily added.

My face immediately went pale, and I backed away from Lily as she came closer. But I quickly ended up against the wall.

“L-Lily, I didn’t lie,” I stammered.

“I can tell you did,” she said.

“M-Maybe my brother’s the one who’s lying!”

“No, I can see right through you.”

“Lily...” I pleaded, hoping that she would have mercy on me.

But reality was cruel.

Lily caught me easily, then disciplined me to her heart’s content.

***

Lily had been with me longer than my brother, but she was still so mean!

Maybe she was loyal to the head of the family. Still, I thought it would’ve been okay for her to like me after spending so much time with me. Also, my father was still the head of the family!

My brother wasn’t affectionate enough with me, and Lily wasn’t either! It wasn’t like I wanted them to dote on me as much as my father did, but they could’ve at least been a little nicer.

They could even have been nice enough to let me break off my engagement! Then I’d have been happy as a clam.

But that wasn’t going to happen. There was no way my brother would do that for me. No way at all. Unless he died in some kind of unexpected accident.

Which meant I had to do something myself!

I let out a deep, sad sigh.

“Leticia?”

Oh, heck! That's right! I was in the middle of a tea party with the prince!

"It would seem I became distracted due to fatigue," I said. "My apologies, Your Highness."

While I did apologize for being lost in thought in the middle of our tea party, I also implied that it was because of the tutor they'd given me. As a freebie, I threw in one of those polite ladylike smiles my tutor had drilled into me...but the expression on Lord Clarke's pretty face hardened.

Huh. Had I really been that disrespectful?

All I did was zone out for a bit! I didn't think I'd earned such a strong reaction...

But if I'd made him uncomfortable, I had to apologize. This person was going to be the number one authority in this country someday, after all. If I'd upset him too much, who knew what my brother would do to me? Nadir was scary.

"I apologize for causing you discomfort on such a special occasion," I said. "My deepest apologies, Your Highness."

To make sure it came across as a proper apology, I bowed my head, without smiling this time.

I'd thought this would be enough for sure, but when I lifted my head, his expression was still stiff. Not just his face, actually—his whole posture hadn't changed at all. Wow. Wasn't it hard to stay still like that while holding a teacup?

Maybe I needed to apologize again, but, like, sounding desperate this time? With tears?

As I fretted over what to do, His Highness Prince Clarke finally moved. He set down his teacup, his movements awkward like he wore a rusty suit of armor.

"Le-Leticia?"

“Yes?”

“What did you just call me?”

Ohh. *That* was what he was upset about.

“I apologize for my lack of awareness previously,” I said. “I’ve been calling you ‘Lord Clarke,’ in an overly familiar fashion, for which I am ashamed. From now on, I will be certain to call you ‘Your Highness Prince Clarke.’”

Okay! Now all I had to do was flash a ladylike smile!

I repeated the same smile that hadn’t impressed him before. See, the key was to make sure your mouth was closed, so it looked refined.

But the prince grabbed my shoulder, so stiffly I almost thought I could hear him creaking. I wondered if he’d have gotten mad at me if I’d said I didn’t want him to touch me much because I wasn’t his wife yet. He probably would’ve. It was best not to add fuel to the fire.

“Le-Leticia...”

“Yes?”

“Who told you that?”

Why was he asking that? Oh! Did he think someone was bullying me? No, no. I’d just have bullied them back twice as hard, so no worries, no worries.

“My tutor at the palace,” I said.

I was trying to reassure him, but he furrowed his brow and got upset instead. I wished his pretty face would stop looking so scary and grim. Or at least I wished he’d keep a little distance!

His Highness Prince Clarke cleared his throat, then gave me a small smile. What a sudden change of attitude. That, in itself, was scary.

“Leticia.”

I didn’t mind, not really, but why did he always start a conversation by saying my name?

With this completely unimportant thought in mind, I answered, “Yes?”

His hand grabbed my shoulder a little tighter. It didn’t hurt, but it was even scarier.

“Listen to me,” the prince said. “We’re equals, you and I.”

“Huh? I don’t think we are—”

“We are,” he cut in before I could finish.

That wasn’t right, though. He was a prince, and the future ruler of this country. I was the daughter of a duke. Which, I mean, *was* pretty high-class, but not on the same level as him.

“Leticia. You’re going to marry me,” he said.

“Right...” I nodded along. I wanted to refute it, though, because I didn’t want to marry him. But I couldn’t really say that now.

His Highness Prince Clarke seemed displeased with my half-hearted answer, but he kept talking. “And after that happens, you’ll soon be queen. Do you understand that? The king and queen are a married couple.”

Well, yeah. Everyone knew that. He didn’t have to explain that part! I wanted to ask if he was making fun of me, but instead I held back and gave him another half-hearted “Right...” in response.

“And married couples are equal,” he continued.

“Right...”

“So you and I are equals, Leticia.”

I felt like he was splitting hairs.

“I think that would be a valid point when talking about common households,” I said, reluctantly giving him more than another non-answer, “but the king and queen have different positions, I think.”

“The king and queen are equals,” he insisted.

“No, I don’t think so...”

Yes, the king and queen were a married couple, but the king naturally had more authority. The queen came after him, and while she did have the second most authority, it didn’t match his. Their duties were different too.

“They’re equals. In fact, my father and mother call each other by their first names.”

They did?

I’d met the royal couple a few times, so I tried to remember how they interacted, but nothing came to mind. The only thing that came to mind was the queen’s beauty.

“Still,” I protested, “we’re only engaged, so I should say ‘Your Highness’...”

“You’re going to marry me someday, so you can call me by name.”

“No, I think it’s better to take it seriously and set an example for the other nobles and for the people.”

“I said it’s fine, which means it’s fine.”

Now he was starting to sound like a tyrant! He was being really stubborn about it, for some reason... Well, to be fair, if he said it was okay, then most people would agree that it was.

“Not necessarily,” I countered. “My tutor and brother have said—”

“I. Said. It’s. Fine,” he stressed, pausing after each word for emphasis.

“But...” I trailed off, trying to hide my desire to not be so casual with him and think of a way to keep calling him “Your Highness.”

“I. Said. It’s. Fine,” he repeated with a dazzling smile that did absolutely nothing to mask how pushy he sounded.

All this back-and-forth over how to address him was getting old, though.

“In that case, I’ll continue to call you Lord Clarke as I have been,” I said, finally relenting.

“Okay. Remember, we are equals.”

I wondered why he was so insistent on being equals.

My mind was filled with doubts, but now that his mood had improved, I couldn’t risk asking him the wrong thing. I just sipped my tea instead.

***

“And that’s how that went,” the prince explained. “Ever since, to ensure that Leticia keeps calling me by name, I’ve constantly reminded her that we’re equals, and here we are now.”

“How romantic, to want to be called by your name!” Maria exclaimed.

I didn’t think it was romantic at all. What about that was romantic? And what *kind* of romantic was Maria talking about?

I’d been having tea with her and Brie when the topic of how I addressed Lord Clarke came up. And the prince, who had barged in through the secret door just then, had explained in great detail.

Well, honestly, I didn’t really remember it all that clearly. I couldn’t possibly remember every little thing from when I’d been eight! But I *did* remember Lord Clarke constantly telling me that we were equals. And every time, I’d argue in my mind that we weren’t.

That wasn’t important, though. What *was* important was that I wished he’d stop waltzing in through the secret door as if that were something normal people did all the time. He could’ve at least used the regular door! Also, could he please not butt into people’s tea parties?

His timing was so perfect that I couldn’t help but suspect that he’d been lurking about, waiting for the right moment to barge in.

“Huh... Hmm... Huh...” Brie mumbled, looking at me suggestively.

What did she want to say?! Actually, never mind. I didn’t want her to say it.

“So,” she began, saying it anyway, “did she correct this term of address immediately?”

“No,” the prince replied. “For a while, she remained concerned about those around us, and continued to address me as ‘Your Highness,’ so I went directly to Nadir instead.”

I wished he’d stop relying on my brother every time he found himself troubled. Why would he skip past me and go straight to Nadir?

His words reminded me that, indeed, my brother *had* spent about three weeks endlessly reminding me to call the prince “Lord Clarke.” He’d been so persistent that it’d put out even the little mischievous fire I had in my heart to address the prince in a way he didn’t like. My brother was way too obstinate—in other words, a jerk.

“Ah, poor you,” Brie said softly to me. “How hard it must be to have him as a brother.”

“I don’t want to hear that from the woman who wants to marry him,” I replied.

“He may be like that, yes, but he has money.”

“Money, money, it’s always money with you! You can’t buy love with money!”

“What do you mean? You can buy *most* kinds of love with money.”

“Hey!” I snapped. Had Brie forgotten her modesty?! “Don’t say that in front of Maria! Maria, cover your ears!”

The handmaiden, meanwhile, furrowed her brows. “It would be hard for me to work while covering my ears,” she protested. “Don’t worry. I’m already an adult!”

“I don’t want you to be corrupted, Maria.”

“Why are you so protective of that girl?” Brie asked.

“Because she’s adorable!” I replied. Was there another reason, I wondered? No. No, there wasn’t.

Brie seemed exasperated, and Maria was flustered. See, her being flustered like that was adorable! It made me warm and fuzzy.

“I think *you’re* cute, Lettie,” Lord Clarke said.

“You really don’t have to say that,” I told him.

“The fact your cheeks turn red every time I say it is also cute.”

“Really. Seriously. You don’t have to say that. In fact, you could simply return to your room, and I’d be content.”

“The fact you’re so indifferent is also cute.”

“Are you just going to keep calling everything cute?” I asked, desperately trying to hide my probably-quite-red cheeks.

He smiled gently at me in response. What the heck? How was I supposed to interpret that?

“I feel like my status as a single woman is being rubbed in my face,” Brie said.

“It’s okay, Lady Brianna!” Maria exclaimed. “I’m single too!”

“You have a cute little prince. You do not belong in this club.”

“I keep telling everyone that it’s not like that!”

Brie angrily stuffed a cookie into her mouth. She always ate so much whenever she came over!

Huffily, Maria poured us more tea, looking dissatisfied at being associated with Prince Louis.

“You know, it really would be best to call you ‘Your Highness’—” I began.

“Lettie,” the prince interrupted. “I. Said. It’s. Fine.”

That was the same line as before. Yikes.

“I’ll keep calling you Lord Clarke, then!”

“Good. Please remember never to call me ‘Your Highness.’ And, when I’m king, do not call me ‘Your Majesty.’”

Wow. He even future-proofed his statement. I wonder if he’d caught on to the fact I *was*, in fact, planning on calling him Your Majesty when the time came.

I glanced at him, and he offered me a smile that betrayed nothing.

“There’s the staring contest,” Brie said. “I should probably get going.”

“Allow me to escort you, then,” Maria said.

“Wait, wait, wait!” I pleaded. “Please! Stay!”

I managed to persuade Brie to stay with an offer of additional cookies, which she promptly started munching on as soon as she resumed her seat.

“If you’re going to flaunt your marital status, you could at *least* introduce me to someone,” Brie said. “As the crown princess, surely you have the connections to order a rich nobleman to marry me.”

“No, I can’t simply engage in something so ethically dubious,” I told her.

“Ugh! Why are you so honest?! I know, all right?! I know!” she exclaimed, cramming three cookies into her mouth at once in a blatant disregard for the rules of etiquette.

How did she eat this much and not gain weight, while I got stuck in walls? Wait...did all the calories go to her bust? They did, didn’t they? Ugh. I was so jealous...

I pinched my sides. They were slimmer than back when I’d gotten stuck, but still plumper than when I’d first arrived at the palace. Oh, the humanity.

Okay. From now on, I’d go on a run every time I ate sweets. Yes.

Honestly, I should’ve just stopped eating sweets altogether, but the ones they served at the palace were just so delectable! I wanted to stuff my face full of them. And I would’ve liked to continue doing so. Giving them up was a last resort.

“Now, Leticia,” Lord Clarke called out, sipping on the tea Maria had poured for him. “Why don’t we get rid of the ‘Lord’ part next, hmm?”

Oh, come *on*.

Afterword

Hello, everyone! I’m Izumi Sawano.

Thank you very much for picking up *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons*!

For this story, I wanted to portray a young noblewoman who wants to escape, and a prince who does everything he can to chase after her.

I also wanted this to be a simple, straightforward romantic comedy, so the story is peaceful and doesn’t really have any dark parts. There are no hidden agendas, no deaths, and even when there’s a kidnapping, nothing serious happens.

This isn’t exactly a secret behind-the-scenes fact, but when I finished writing the first draft, Leticia’s kidnapping wasn’t included. All she did was keep trying to escape the royal palace and get caught by Clarke.

My original intention had been for the story to be just about that, but since the theme in my head was “a noblewoman who escapes, a prince who chases,” I thought, “Wow, she doesn’t actually escape much! But Clarke is way too vigilant. She can’t escape the palace by herself!” The end result was that she ended up being kidnapped by a foreign prince who wasn’t under Clarke’s orders.

I considered making Prince Louis a rival for Clarke, but I wanted to use the fact that Maria looks like Leticia somewhere. And if I’d made him a rival, I’d end up feeling bad for whoever didn’t end up with Leticia, so my parental instincts kicked in, and I dropped the rival idea.

On the other hand, Lyle’s role hasn’t changed at all from my initial idea. I wanted to keep him as a background character as much as possible.

This is the first book I’ve ever published, so I had no idea what to do. It was a major struggle, but somehow I managed to shape it into something. I

can’t thank my editor enough for teaching me so much when I was so lost.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all those who have worked hard on the publication of this book. Thank you all so much!

And to those of you who chose *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons* out of the countless books available out there: thank you so, so much.

Izumi Sawano

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